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THE LOST LINK.

A Novel.

BY

TOM HOOD,

AUTHOR OF "A GOLDEN HEART," ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:

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DEDICATION

TO

EDWARD WYLAM, ESQ.

MY DEAR WYLAM,

It gives me great pleasure to
inscribe this book to you, as a slight, and but
insufficient, record of our uninterrupted friend-
ship, and of the regard I feel for you.

Yours always,

TOM HOOD.

GREEN BANK, PENGGE,
July, 1868.



P R E F A C E.



IF I may claim for these pages credit for anything beyond the purpose of amusing and interesting my readers, it must be for a humble attempt, by way of experiment, to make something new out of those stock materials of fiction — bigamy, and the detective police.

T. H.

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THE LOST LINK.



CHAPTER I.

THE RING OF BELLS.

IF you do not know the Black Level in Beaveshire, you have a quaint bit of Western England yet to make acquaintance with. It occupies a large proportion of the central part of the county, and forms as fine a pasturage ground as you could wish to see. In the summer, if you get on one of the mounds that occur here and there in the flat, you can look round you for miles and see the cattle feeding by hundreds, and sheep covering the ground by the acre. As the autumn

comes on, the flocks and herds are driven off the level, for when the rains fall there are sudden floods that lay the whole extent of the low-lying land under water. There are not many human habitations in the Black Level save those of small farmers and turf-cutters, and they are built on the highest ground that can be found. A boat belongs to each of the houses, beached high and dry in the back garden all the summer, to be useful when the waters are out in the winter. One of the chief peculiarities of the scenery—monotonous enough in all conscience—is to be found in the turf stacks which dot the moors like the chimneys of a subterranean factory town.

Hedges are rare in the Black Level; the fields are bounded by wide ditches, or rheans, as they are locally termed, in which the waters lie stagnant and inky, taking their dark tint from the black soil of the moor.

There are two or three slow-going canals in the district, spanned, where the cattle-

tracks or bye-roads cross them, by echoing wooden bridges that are seldom raised to let barges pass. The canals seem to have been made rather as drains than as arteries for the flow of commerce.

On the skirts of the Black Level, and above the highest flood-mark, there comes a little fringe of villages and hamlets, whose inhabitants are tolerably prosperous for agricultural small folk, noted chiefly for the excellence of their cheese. Where the Black Level stretches toward the sea the agricultural element is mingled with the maritime, and the villages become fishing-places, nestling among bleak, reedy sand-hills, which fence off the high tides that would otherwise overrun the Black Level itself, from Brant-under-the-Head (a small seaport, not far from a solitary pile of rock, which rises from the flat and runs out to sea here) as far as the Tor, a sort of twin eminence, many miles inland, whence you can on a clear day make out the sea on south and north.

Westward of Brant, the river Char empties itself into the sea, bringing down between its steep banks a little fleet of coasters, that take in cargoes at Smugbury, a few miles up. Eastward of Brant run the long line of sand-hills and the level stretch of sand and mud, with two fishing villages situated on them, between Brant and the great busy city of Braxted, where there are factories and stores and wharfs and docks—all the paraphernalia of commerce and trade. One of the fishing villages last mentioned was rapidly rising into the dignity of a small seaport town, or, at all events, a watering-place. Southstone-on-the-Sea had a little bay of its own, where the bathing was held to be specially salubrious on account of the mud ; so crescents, and churches, and hotels had grown there, and there was a library, and a little stone pier, a band in the season, and scandal all the year round. What could it need more to qualify it for the proud position of a fashionable seaside resort !



Having thus explained to you the general appearance of the Black Level and the adjacent sea-coast, I must take you back in the direction of the Tor to the little hamlet of Bartle, where my story begins.

Bartle was purely agricultural. Its most independent people were the turf-cutters, whose wants were few and whose notions were humble. The small farmers were dependent on their labourers, and the labourers looked to them for the miserable pittance that was to keep body and soul together week after week, till ague swept them off, or they dropped rotting into the Union. Poor masters made poor men, and ill-paid and overworked men made unremunerative toil for their employers. It was all hand to mouth work, and since—in these desperate cases of struggle and hopeless poverty—the hand oftenest went to the mouth with a cup of sour cider, one of the most prosperous establishments in the hamlet was the Ring of Bells.

The Ring of Bells did not depend solely on the custom of the villagers. Bartle was a central spot for many little towns and large villages that lay away from the lines of railway. So travellers in all branches of industry that found a market in Beaveshire, put up at the Ring of Bells, and made excursions into the surrounding districts. As a consequence, the Ring of Bells kept a mouldy gig, and a tall, lean white horse, with a man to drive it. There was a commercial room, too, and a gaunt handmaid who called herself the chambermaid, and dug up potatoes when there was no one staying at the house.

There was no earthly reason why this long, low barn of a building should have been called the Ring of Bells, unless it were that there was no church within forty miles of it that could boast anything better than a sheep-bell, and even those which boasted of a sheep-bell only clanked it every other Sunday on an average, when somebody from

the neighbouring parishes found time to come down and read service. Sermons were things next to unknown, for the clergy of the district seemed to be of the opinion of that acute but eccentric divine who, being taxed by his bishop with the sparseness of his discourses, deponed that, in his belief, one good one now and then was worth ever so many bad ones running.

It was not an inviting inn, the Ring of Bells. A muddy yard, with the white horse gazing with an anxious eye from his rickety stable, as who should say, "I trust you're not a commercial traveller, or, at least, if you are, that you don't travel in hardware!"—with the yellow gig looming biliously out of a tumble-down shed—with straw blowing about in wisps, inspected with a sort of despairing listlessness by bedraggled fowls, that turned it over with a "tuk, tuk, crauk," which said as plainly as words could speak, "I don't expect to find a grain in you—but there!" Nor were one's impressions ren-

dered more cheerful on entering. The lower rooms were the reverse of lofty, were far from clean, and were everlastingly redolent of stale cider, staler beer, and tobacco-smoke stalest of all ! There was a poor pretence of a bar, with rows of bottles half-full of treacly spirits, with a basket of flabby biscuits on the shelves, and a torn, illegible local paper, only valuable as a study for a mathematician, who might have found employment—and he would need it—in calculating how many millions of times the brown circles, produced by the setting of the wet bottoms of mugs on the paper, could be described on an average-sized journal without two of them exactly coinciding.

Upstairs the rooms were loftier and more cheerful in aspect. They had large chimney-corners and expansive hearths, dark panelling and huge bedsteads. The Ring of Bells was an inn to sleep at, sup at, breakfast at—not to spend the day at, dine at, or loaf at.

The domestic servants at the Ring of Bells

seemed to find existence there not much more agreeable than did the horse or the fowls. The lank chambermaid, Mercy Wilkins, was a tall, angular woman, with a sallow complexion and a taciturn disposition. If her godfathers and godmothers had tried all their lives, they could not have found a more unsuitable designation for her than Mercy. She was the very embodiment of unrelenting severity. When, on the arrival of some hungry traveller, she made a descent on the fowl-house and singled out her squauking, struggling victim, she might have passed for the high-priestess of some gloomy deity as she stood with the gory knife clutched in her hand—that is, if the high-priestess of a gloomy deity ever wore a cotton gown rather narrow in the skirt, and a small plaid shawl pinned tightly over the shoulders.

The other domestic at the Ring of Bells was John, or, as he was locally styled, Jan. He was a feeble compromise between a waiter

and an ostler, which was the result of his having to live in a perpetual state of preparation to assume the duties of either functionary at a moment's notice. A wiry man was John, without a single ounce of superfluous flesh, gray headed, yet not old, and with a stoop in his shoulders. He was as close as a miser—he never gave you more than monosyllables, and as few of those as possible, except when he had taken a drop. Then he had plenty to say, but at other times you would have concluded that his education had been brought to a premature close before he arrived at words of two syllables. He was very like the peppercastor which stood on the sideboard in the Commercial Room. You might shake, and jerk, and rap it, but the condiment only came out in single grains and by slow degrees, until the top came off, and then you got too much.

The landlord of the Ring of Bells was always either in bed or incapable, alternating

between fits of ague and fits of brandy and water. His wife was a very stout woman, who seldom stirred beyond the bar parlour. In fact, so seldom did she stir, and so stout was she, that the frequenters of the inn had a tradition that she had grown to such a size she couldn't get out of the parlour door.

It was a wild, blowing night. The long rows of poplars that marked the course of the canal here and there, lashed in the gale like so many fly-rods. There was a moon, but it only showed at times through the scud that hurried along overhead. It was an ugly evening for a ride across the Black Level; for, with your head down to battle against the buffeting of the storm, and with only an occasional glint of light that rather blinded than assisted your eyes, you might very easily have plunged into one of the broad dykes; and once in a broad dyke, with a tenacious bed of mud and with steep sides, the chances are you and the horse would have been drowned.

There was a traveller pushing forward over the moor on this night. He was a stranger to the district, or he would never have ridden as recklessly as he did. Fortunately, though his horse was strange in that district too, it had that wonderful extra perception which we, out of envy possibly, try to depreciate by calling it instinct. Guided by that mysterious sense, the traveller's sturdy little nag avoided the dangers, and stuck to the middle of the narrow tortuous road, pegging away for dear life, as if it knew that the spits of rain that came on the gale now and then meant a heavy shower as soon as the force of the wind was a little spent.

John heard the hoofs some distance off, and he knew that the horse they belonged to was not a nag of his acquaintance. Living on the moor where there were no hedges to intercept sound, John had acquired a keen sense of hearing, and knew the pace and rhythm of every horse in the

neighbourhood. So he guessed there was custom coming to the Ring of Bells, and he was right.

Before long the stranger drew rein in front of the inn, flung himself out of the saddle, unbuckled his valise, and gave his horse up to the ostler, with a few instructions as to his food and bed. That done, he entered the inn, pushed open the commercial room door, gazed round, saw nobody was there, strode up to the fire, and flung himself into the arm-chair, after ringing the bell.

Mercy was out, gone on an errand to the other end of Bartle, so John was chambermaid as well as ostler and waiter.

"Ring, s'r?" said John, interrogatively answering the bell.

"Is there any one stopping here? or do you expect any one?"

"Can't say, s'r," said the ostler, answering the last question only, for he resented the putting of two questions at once.

“Then I’ll have a private room—and a good fire, mind you, my friend. And here—stop! What can I have to eat?”

John took down a fly-spotted brown card, and handed it to the traveller. On it was inscribed a list of articles of food obtainable at the Ring of Bells.

Boiled fowl,

Roast fowl,

Mutton chop, &c.

The choice was limited, for, of course, “&c.” meant simply nothing.

“I’ll have a roast fowl for supper, as soon as my room’s ready.”

“Yes, s’r,” said John, who conceived life was too short for him to waste words and time in explaining that, until Mercy returned, supper must remain in abeyance.

While John is lighting the fire, we’ll take a survey of the new comer.

He was a young man, well dressed, with an elegance of bearing that bespoke him a

gentleman and a man of education. His face was pale, his hair, which was rather long, was jet black, and he wore a slight moustache. His eye was a keen one, but restless and suspicious, and there was a nervous twitching about his mouth, which was mobile, but lacking in firmness—though there was no want of determination about the expression of the rest of the face. He seemed thinner than he really was, because his clothes were dark, and he was closely buttoned up.

He sat watching the fire, raising his head and listening at every sound, until John came back with the laconic announcement,

“Room, s'r. Fire. This way!”

CHAPTER II.

SHOWING HOW TWO BEDS WERE ORDERED, AND
NEITHER WAS SLEPT IN.

THERE was another traveller making
towards the Ring of Bells on this
night. He was on foot, and found it no
easy task to make headway against the
furious gusts that came sweeping over the
flats, howling like so many demons, and
wrestling with him as though they would
carry him off bodily. This second traveller
was seemingly a stranger too. He was
making his way across country, and carried
a pole for leaping the ditches; but it was
plain from the course he took that he was
not acquainted with the ground. He kept
straight onwards towards the lights of the

Ring of Bells, without diverging right or left, and often taking ugly leaps, not always with complete success, when within twenty yards on either hand he might have passed dryshod, over a gateway between the pastures.

I have said he was not always successful in clearing the dykes, which was hardly to be wondered at; for, although he was an expert jumper, the light was very imperfect, and the ground very deceptive. He would alight on what looked like the firm bank, to find it was only the water, crossed over and thickly set with reeds, rushes, and aquatic plants. He was splashed from head to heel, and was altogether considerably weather-beaten and travel-stained as though he had been journeying for days without stopping.

When he gained the road a little distance from the Ring of Bells, he paused, and sat on the gate to recover his breath. Carefully surveying the place, he at last concealed his

pole by the side of the dyke, and proceeded to cut himself a stoutish sapling from a small apology for a hedge which adorned the road for a short distance on either side of the inn. That done, he stole quietly up to the side of the house and listened. Then he peered in at the windows ; and finally, as if reassured by the quiet and apparently deserted state of the inn, he made his way in. In the passage he encountered Mercy. That amiable female had been detained on her errand, and found, when she returned, her mistress in a bad temper, and the guest upstairs impatient for supper. Mercy was somewhat sour in disposition, and was not at all the sort of person to suffer either her mistress's scolding or a guest's complaint with thorough equanimity. On this occasion she was more than ordinarily nettled, because her mistress, when complaining of her delay, had said she "couldn't account for it, for she (Mercy) was too old and too ugly to be troubled with a sweetheart to keep her philandering about

instead of attending to her work." Old and ugly as she was, Mercy was not so old and so ugly (what woman ever is?) as to think she might not have a sweetheart, and so the taunt rankled sorely.

"Can I have a room?" asked the new comer.

"Yon's the commercial room," said Mercy, snappishly, having summed up the stranger's personal appearance, and setting him down as a tramping bagman.

The door of the commercial room was ajar, and John was in there laying the tray to take up the supper when it was cooked. The new comer heard the rattle of knives and forks, and the shuffling of feet, and supposed there were several people in the room.

"Can't I have a private room?" he asked.

"Yes, sure. Go upstairs; you'll see one on your right at the top, first landing," answered Mercy, shortly. "I wish you'd

stopped away awhile," she added to herself. "One plague's enough at a time. Ye can just go up and sit down in the dark till I've time to 'tend to ye."

The traveller stumbled upstairs in the dark, not blessing, you may be certain, the brusqueness of the handmaid, but for private reasons preferring to seek the room she described, to waiting in the commercial room till she could show it him.

He found the first landing and the door on the right. He opened it. The room was dark. He paused for a moment, and looked round him. A pencil of light shone upon him from a crack in a door opposite.

"She must have meant to the left, not to the right. Is there any one there?"

He listened, but could detect no sound save the crackling of the fire. So he turned the handle of the door quietly, and stepped into the room. He saw a figure seated in front of the blazing faggot, and paused. His step had been so stealthy that the

occupant of the chamber had not heard him enter, so he could take a good look at him. The inspection seemed to reassure him. He glided quietly forward, so noiselessly that he was at the other's side before the latter was aware of his presence, which even then was betrayed not so much by any sound as by the glancing of the firelight on a metal button on his waistcoat.

Directly he caught sight of a figure standing by him, the first comer gave a little cry of terror, and leaping up, flung himself on the other and grappled him by the throat. He was the taller and stronger of the two, and the other was wearied besides with his struggles across country.

"Loose your hold!" said the shorter man, half-choked. "Loose your hold, or I'll knife you. You're throttling me! Are you mad?"

The dark man, seeing the other was alone, and by no means his match in strength or activity, released his hold a little.

"Who are you? What are you doing

here?" he asked, scrutinising the other keenly.

"I'm a traveller—I asked for a private room, and they told me below to come up. Seeing a light here, and hearing no noise, I supposed this was my room."

"Then why steal upon me like a robber?"

"I did nothing of the sort," said the shorter man, turning pale. "You were so deep in thought, you didn't hear me. I fancied I recognised you"—he felt the other's hand tighten on his throat, and added hastily, "but I don't—I was mistaken."

The dark man gradually released his hold, and fell back a pace or two. The other shook himself, and slipping his hand into his collar, gave it a loosening tug to set himself comfortable after the strangulation.

At this moment the door opened, and Mercy walked in with the tray.

"You're in the wrong room," she said, snappishly, to the shorter man. "Yon's

yours, over the way. Here, I'll take your candles there."

She took a couple of brass candlesticks off the tray, lit the candles, and carried them into the opposite room. The intruder having apologised to the dark stranger for having broken in upon him, and the dark stranger having expressed—though not very plainly—a hope that he had not hurt the intruder, the two men separated.

Mercy placed the candles on the table in the second comer's room, and proceeded to set light to the fire in the grate. The traveller took a close survey of his apartment and its bearings, ending his inspection by throwing up the window with a muttered remark about the room being full of smoke, and looking out to see how his room lay. When Mercy had kindled the fire, he ordered some chops and a pint of sherry, and bidding her bring up two or three of the best cigars the Ring of Bells could boast, threw himself down on the sofa, with the sigh of a man

who has been travelling without a moment's rest, and is thoroughly wearied out. He closed his eyes, and was asleep ere Mercy returned with the cigars; but he slept so lightly, that his eyes opened as soon as her hand touched the handle of the door.

The first stranger—whom we will, if you please, to avoid confusion, call henceforward Charles Lewis, as that name appears on his valise—sat down to his supper with an excellent appetite, and took his glass of grog afterwards with apparent satisfaction.

By-and-by Mercy made her appearance to ask if there was anything more wanted, as they were going to shut up the house to go to bed.

“Show me where my bed-room is, there's a good girl, and that's all I require,” said Charles Lewis.

“This way, sir, then, please,” said Mercy, and taking up the candle, she led the way to the end of the passage, and on to a door in another passage, which ran at right angles.

“That’s your room, sir. I believe there’s all you want there!”

“Thanks, that will do excellently,” said Lewis.

As he turned to go back to his sitting-room, he fancied he caught sight of a figure at the turn of the passage. He hurried on, and as he reached the angle heard the door of the room where the other traveller was close. It had evidently been closed too rapidly to be closed in complete silence, but the sound was so slight that it was clear that an attempt was made to do it noiselessly.

Charles Lewis turned pale and bit his lip. His eye flashed. He paused and listened as he reached his sitting-room floor. He heard the sound of heavy breathing, as of a sleeper in the opposite room. Its occupant was feigning sleep, Lewis was certain.

Beckoning Mercy to come into his room, he told her, in a low voice, that after all he

had one more order—she must let him have his bill, as he might have to leave at day-break.

Having brought the bill and received payment, Mercy bade Lewis good-night, and went to ask the other guest if he needed anything further. He wished to be shown his bed-room, he said; and having been shown it, desired Mercy not to call him until late next morning, as he was tired and stood in need of a good night's rest. So Mercy bade him good-night, too, and went downstairs.

Then followed the usual sounds of shutting up—the slamming of doors, shooting of bolts, closing of shutters, and shuffling of feet. The host, free for the nonce from ague, went blundering and stumbling and reeling up to bed. The creaking and complaining stairs shortly after announced that the stout landlady was retiring to rest; and when John's heavy footfall died out in the garret, and the clap of Mercy's down-at-heel

slippers had sunk into silence, the house became quiet.

The two guests did not seek their rooms until an hour or more after. Lewis discovered, to his intense dissatisfaction, that there was no key to his door, and no bolts. He pushed the table against the door, and then seating himself on the side of his bed, without attempting to undress, fell into a reverie—not so entirely lost in meditation, however, as not to be on the alert at the slightest sound.

And there were sounds. As he listened, he heard the faint squeak caused by the turning of the handle of a door not far off. He felt rather than heard a step in the passage, pausing outside his room. In order to assure the listener he was not asleep, Lewis moved about the room and pushed a chair. This manoeuvre had the desired effect, for he was conscious of the retiring of the footsteps. He then drew a pistol from his valise—noiselessly removed

the barricade and peeped out. All was quiet. He closed the door. A glance at his candle showed that it was rapidly sinking into the socket. There was no time to lose. He opened his bed-room window and looked out. It was an ugly drop; but a wooden spout close by was wide enough to afford a secure foothold, and along it he could get to a wall, against which the stable was built: the slanting roof of that offered an easy descent.

Thrusting the pistol into the breast of his coat, Lewis crawled out of the window, and trusted himself to the spout. It shook a little, but did not give way. He gained the wall—the stable—the ground. Once there he took to his legs, and ran as fast as he could, as fleet as a hare, and, like a hare too, doubling, for he went back along the road by which he had reached the inn.

In about an hour's time, the door of the other traveller opened stealthily, and its occupant crept out on tiptoe. He glided

noiselessly to Lewis's door and listened. All was as still as death :—by slow degrees, by a movement so cautious and slow that it was almost imperceptible, he turned the handle and pushed the door open by degrees. This was all done so craftily that the most acute ear would not have detected a sound.

The gray of dawn was beginning to show, and the room was sufficiently light to allow the traveller to see at a glance that the bird was flown.

He started ! A fit of trembling seized him, and his knees gave under him.

“Gone ! To give the alarm, possibly ! But I'll die sooner than be taken !”

The open window caught his eye, and suggested a means of escape. As he moved towards it, he saw the valise lying open on the chair. A smile passed over his face, and hastily buckling the straps, he slung the little pormanteau over his shoulder and climbed out of the window. He climbed like a cat, and gained the wall in half the time

it took Lewis. Once there, he did not stay to make his way to the stable roof, but dropt on the grass below, and ran off to the spot where the leaping-pole was concealed.

Having recovered the pole, he paused for a moment. "Across country or along the road; day's breaking, and a man cutting across the fields attracts more attention than he does on the road. So the road be it, Edward Griffin: and here goes!"

With that he set out in the opposite direction to Lewis at a long swinging pace like the gallop of a wolf.

Morning broke fast. The rain of the previous evening had cleared the air, and it was a beautiful dawn—the harbinger of a fine day—that looked on the two fugitives flying in opposite directions. Presently life began to be stirring. Old John was the first about at the Ring of Bells. After opening the shutters in the lower part of the house, he betook himself to the stables.

As he stood in the doorway, blacking his

boots with one foot on an upturned bucket, a horseman rode up, along the road by which Edward Griffin had taken his departure.

The new comer was a thick-built common-looking man, set up in somewhat soldierlike style. There was a cunning look in his eye, a compression about his mouth, and a general expression all over his face, of assumed superiority—the look and bearing of a man raised to authority, and accustomed to be obeyed and respected.

“Here, ostler!” he shouted.

John stepped up to him.

“Any one stirring here yet?”

“Me!” said John.

“That all? Have you any folks stopping here?”

“One,” said John. You must remember John had had no dealings with Griffin, who came afoot, and had only seen Mercy. Mercy and John were not given to converse much, so that the latter was ignorant of

the arrival of the second guest. "But," you will ask, perhaps, "why did he not learn the fact from having two pairs of boots to clean?" Because, oddly enough, neither of the guests had left their boots outside their doors for that purpose!

"What's he like? Short or tall?" asked the horseman.

"Same size, 'bout, as you an' me!"

Now, there was a considerable difference between the height of John and that of the new comer—not a foot, perhaps, but over six inches, at any rate.

"Dark or fair?" asked the horseman.

"Dark."

"How did he come?"

"Horse," said John, jerking his thumb over his shoulder towards the stable.

The new comer dismounted, and advancing to John put a couple of half-crowns in his hand, and said, "Look'ee here, my chap. My name's Molewarp"—he paused as if he expected John to be struck all of a heap at

this information, but John remained unmoved, so he continued—"Molewarp, of the London police; a detective officer, in fact. You answer my questions to help me, and those two half-crowns 'll multiply surprisin'. But, mum's the word. Don't breathe a syllable to a soul—not even your sweetheart."

"No!" said John with a grim smile, "I can't."

"Now, is this customer in the house?"

"Yes: a-bed!"

"Where's his room?"

"Yon!" and John pointed.

"Why, the window's open! Is that the room?" asked Molewarp, eagerly.

"Aye!"

"Here, come along!" said the detective, and he hurried up under the window. He at once followed the wooden shoot to the wall, and then glanced down the wall to the ground below.

"Humph! I thought so. Off, by jingo!"

and he drew John's attention to the deeply-impressed marks of two heels in the wet earth. "Has he taken his horse?"

"No. I'd just give him a feed when you came!"

"Then I shan't have much trouble in catching him up, I guess. I fancy I know the road he'll take. How far is it across here to Southstone or Smugbury?" John told him. "Well, now we'll just go in and see if anything's missing indoors. When a chap jumps out o' window he generally takes something with him to break his fall."

They went in, and looked over the lower part of the house, and found, to Molewarp's surprise, that nothing had been removed.

"Now, look here, my man. This is the 20th of October. Just remember that; put it down, 'cos I may want it in evidence. This is the 20th of October, on which mornin' Molewarp, the detective from London, came down to the Ring of Bells (to which he was directed by a tramp he met on

the road), in search of some one that's wanted—an escaped convict from Dartmoor. Just remember all that. And now draw me a mug o' beer, and we'll talk it over, and by that time the people 'll be down, and I can examine 'em. And if I don't clap my hand on that fellow by the end of the week, my name's not Jack Molewarp!"

CHAPTER III.

GERVASE LANE'S CHAMBERS IN KING'S BENCH
WALK.

GERVASE LANE had pleasant chambers in King's Bench Walk. They were a little high up for professional purposes ; but after all Gervase Lane was not likely to be dependent on his professional prospects, so a pleasant look-out into a quiet garden, frequented solely by rooks and benchers, was an ample requital for an extra flight of stairs, to say nothing of the reduction in rent, which was a consideration to a man who, though not likely to live by his wig and gown, had not as yet the enjoyment of a large income.

The bed-room—though not so immense

that you could not find your boots in it of a morning, no matter how hastily you had cast them off on the previous night—was very much larger than the closet wherein Gervase had been accustomed to sleep at Oxford, a place to which, I hereby warn fathers and mothers, it is dangerous to send a growing lad, for fear he should turn out round-shouldered from insufficient sleeping accommodation. There was a small kitchen, with an antechamber—in which, I imagine, it was intended that dishes should stand and cool ere they reached the sitting-room—a spacious and well-lighted room, though rendered a little dim in effect by the dark oak panel. The room was wainscoted all round—if I may use the expression—with bookcases, about two feet and a half in height. On the shelf, which was thus made to run round all the walls, were piled papers, pipes, sticks, gloves, pamphlets, and odds and ends of all sorts. The pictures were mostly engravings; but there were a few water-colours among

them, and some photographs of Alpine scenery. These latter were the only indications of muscular Christianity discoverable in Gervase's chambers. The singlesticks, boxing-gloves, masks, foils, and portraits of ballet-girls which female novelists invariably discover in the rooms of single young men in the Temple, were oddly enough absent from this suite of apartments. And yet Gervase was no milksop; he could ride to hounds, spar, play billiards, was a smart hand at whist, and had rowed in the 'Varsity Eight when he was at Oxford. The only trace, indeed, of such pursuits were a model rudder and miniature pair of oars lying among other knickknacks on the mantelpiece, and made professedly out of the timber of the famous Henley seven-oar, about which there are such long annual discussions in the papers.

Gervase Lane was the heir-expectant of a rich uncle. His father had been a younger son, had entered the army, married a pretty

but poor girl, and left—when he died of fever at Malta—a widow and two children behind him. The young widow and the elder child followed the father in less than a year. The younger child was taken charge of by the uncle.

Mark Lane was a man of violent temper and eccentric habits. He had quarrelled with the woman he loved, and she had married to avenge herself. Whereupon he withdrew from the world, took a château in a retired part of Normandy, where, as he knew nothing of the local tongue, he was not much disturbed. On hearing of his brother's death, he wrote to his lawyers in London, told them to educate the child, and said that he intended to make him his heir. So Gervase was sent to Eton, and then to Trinity, Oxford; and lastly—having been consulted on the point by his uncle's lawyers, and having no particular bias—entered as a student at the Temple, where the lawyers in question, Fladgett, Fladgett, and

Spink, most respectable members of the legal profession, assured him he could spend his time pleasantly enough, and be unencumbered when fortune threw his uncle's property into his lap.

So Gervase entered, and ate the required dinners, not so much in haste to be called, as because in his loneliness in London he was glad to meet old Oxford chums at the table. Among them was a man rather Gervase's senior, who had been the bible-clerk of the latter's college, but left Oxford soon after Gervase went into residence, so that they had not seen much of each other till chance threw them together in the Temple dining-hall. Bartlett—for such was Gervase's friend's name—was a tall, dark, solemn-looking man. He was, when you knew him, no graver than a man should be who has to fight his way in the world, and support a mother and sister. When he warmed up a bit, his face lit up, and his laugh was deep and ready; but in general he was silent and

thoughtful. He worked hard at his profession, and was spoken highly of by many good judges, who said that if he only had as much interest as he had talent, he must before long take a good position at the bar. Interest was just the thing, unfortunately, that he wanted; so he toiled on without much promotion, or much hope of any immediate advantage. He managed to make a little money with his pen, by writing for some daily as well as weekly papers; but what he earned in that way was not much, for the papers for which he wrote, while ready enough to see his talent, were not at all backward in taking advantage of his inexperience, and so made him work hard enough for the paltry pay they gave.

Gervase was greatly delighted with his new friend from Oxford. Thanks to the etiquette of that most liberalising and civilising place of education, Gervase would have been expected to look down upon and patronize (if he had indeed any dealings at

all with) the bible-clerk. In that leveller of false distinctions, London, the positions were reversed, and Gervase was glad enough to profit by Bartlett's wisdom and experience.

Gervase had asked his friend to come in and smoke a cigar with him, an invitation which the latter knew meant a consultation. Accordingly, in the dusk of the evening, when the City churches were clanging out summonses, to which there were only a few people to attend, it being Sunday, when the City is practically a desert, John Bartlett made his appearance at Gervase's chambers in King's Bench Walk.

"Well, Lane, how are you?" he asked on entering.

"Queer—very queer."

"I thought you were going out of town for a bit—you want a little change."

"Confound it, I've had change enough in the last few hours. When I sent that note round to you last night, I had just

received a letter; but I'll tell you all about it directly. Come and sit down and light a weed."

"Thanks; I have my pipe here, though."

"Prefer it? Well, there's bird's-eye in that brown lava tobacco-box, and shag in this pouch."

"I'll take the pouch then. I suppose you smoke it too? Never smoke bird's-eye, it makes the tongue sore, and that organ is a barrister's mainstay."

"Will you have sherry, or spirits, or beer, Bartlett? They're all handy, so only name your choice."

"Is the beer bottled?"

"No, draught."

"Then beer be it, by all means."

"Are you all right now?" asked Gervase, presently returning with a foaming tankard.

"Shall I light the gas?"

"All right; thanks, old boy; but don't light the gas for me. I can think and talk better in the twilight—can't you?"

"Yes, I think so. Well, then, if you're all right, I'll tell you what's gone wrong."

"Go ahead, old fellow."

"You know I have been the adopted son of my uncle Mark, and that I have always been led to suppose he would leave me all his property?"

Bartlett nodded. It was too dark for Gervase to see the movement, but he could distinguish the signal by the dip which the red spark in the bowl of Bartlett's pipe made.

"Confound expectations! They're the worst things a man can have. They cripple his energies only to disappoint him in the end. I had a letter from Fladgett last night to inform me that my uncle was about to marry, but would continue to give me an allowance of two hundred a year for the next six years, by which time he supposes I shall be able to make my own living at the bar!"

"Whew!" said Bartlett. "That is a

change indeed! But I suppose you always contemplated the possibility of his marrying?"

"Not I! The idea never occurred to me; probably because I knew he had had a disappointment in love——"

"All the more likely he'd have another! What is his age?"

"Somewhere between forty and fifty; I don't know which he is nearer; I've not seen him since I was a boy at school."

"Really, you have hardly taken pains to prevent any one's stepping in to oust you."

"Well, he's a queer old fellow, and I believe he would have disliked me if I had been attentive to him."

"What sort of marriage is it that he contemplates?"

"A strange one, I think. I have told you already that he went off in dudgeon to a château in Normandy. Well, he has fallen in with a French countess—French countesses are as plentiful as blackberries, you know!—

and is about to bestow on her his hand and fortune, as they say in the play."

"Ah!—however, the old gentleman has a perfect right to do as he likes with his own, we must admit. You have talent and perseverance, and I don't doubt but you'll get on. Indeed, I think—you know I believe a man is never as well as when he's working himself to death—that you will be all the better for having to exert yourself. You'll be twice the man——"

"Oh, yes. That is all very jolly, theoretically, old fellow, but there's one practical point. This change in my prospects is nothing more or less than the end of my engagement with Mary Bellisham."

"My dear Lane, the woman who could give up a fellow on such paltry grounds——"

"You forget there's a mother in this case. Mary, I am sure, poor girl, would disregard altogether any alteration—even a far worse one—in my position. But her mother is a thoroughly worldly woman. She did not

approve of our engagement from the first, because it was likely to be a longish one, and because my expectations were not very definite. When she hears I have to depend in my success in a hitherto untried profession for the means of making Mary my wife, she will simply insist on our parting. And I, of course, under the circumstances, must give way ; while poor Mary, who is a most tender and obedient daughter, will submit, though her heart should break."

"Humph!" said Bartlett; but the prolonged glow in which he kept his pipe, proved that he was smoking fast and furiously, his habit when deep in meditation.

"Does Fladgett—isn't that the name?" said Bartlett after a pause—"does Fladgett say that the marriage is definitely settled, or only that your uncle is going to marry the countess?"

"Hang it, it's so far settled that the old boy has asked me to go over next week and be his best-man."

“ And you’re going, of course ? ”

“ Certainly ! He’s been very good to me, has kept me well supplied with funds, and given me a capital education. It would be brutally ungrateful to refuse to go, especially as he has few, if any, relatives, and no friends.”

“ Quite right. But how about the young lady ? ”

“ Well, there’s my difficulty. I feel I ought to go and tell her, but with the certain consequences staring me in the face, I feel sorely tempted to play the rascal and hold my tongue.”

“ You had better be honest, simply as a question of superior policy. The news is sure to reach the mother sooner or later ; and then, when the engagement is broken off, she will be able to quote your conduct against you, and there will be no answer to the charge.”

“ You are right, old fellow. I knew it was best to be honest and straightforward,

but I was getting to be a bit of a coward, so I asked your counsel because I knew you'd give me encouragement to do the right thing. But it's hard, isn't it? Isn't it terribly hard to have to destroy your own happiness? It's enough to make a fellow crane a little before he takes a jump."

"Ay, but you won't repent it in the end! When do you go to your uncle's wedding?"

"On Monday or Tuesday week; and I meditate going down into Kent this day week—or rather on the Saturday—to see the Bellishams. There is one thing certain—though the engagement may be broken off between us, Mary will remain true to me, and, I am sure, will marry no one else."

"You're very young, Gervase!" said Bartlett, gravely; "I don't advise you to be too sanguine!"

"You're an old croaker, Bartlett!"

"I may be. But a girl who is so obedient that she gives up the man of her heart at

her mother's wish, may possibly accept a husband of her choosing."

"You're an ill prophet. Why, if I were to ask her, I know she would promise me——"

"But you wouldn't ask her, would you?"

"Why not?"

"Well, I can't give you any reason; it's a mere matter of feeling. I shouldn't do it if I were in your place; and if you think it over, I fancy you won't."

"Well, perhaps not. But your tankard is dry. I'll fill it for you, and drink confusion to all expectations——"

"And softer hearts to women of the world!"

CHAPTER IV.

GERVASE LANE'S LOVE.

MARY BELLISHAM was the daughter of an Indian officer. Few men were better known in the Bengal Presidency than Captain Bellisham, of the Moondiebagh Irregulars. He had been mainly instrumental in raising and maintaining that famous regiment of native cavalry, with which he and the other European officers who were attached to it used to do absolute miracles of bravery and energy. The corps was ubiquitous. It seemed to swoop like a hawk first on one point and then on another, and the troopers had never been known to turn back while they had a European officer to

ride before them. Splendid services were performed by the Moondiebagh Irregulars during many a hard-fought campaign when British dominion was in serious danger.

Under these circumstances it will scarcely be necessary to say that Captain Bellisham, who had done so much to establish the corps, was rewarded—with the usual neglect. Nor was that all. He was called upon to pay out of his own pocket a great many regimental charges, which were either said to be unauthorised, or were due to errors which were almost inevitable in the accounts of such a regiment.

He returned to England thoroughly disheartened, and after a few vain attempts to get justice, he threw up his commission. For some time he was almost penniless, but good fortune brought the retired warrior a friend in the shape of a wine merchant, who wanted a manager for a branch establishment at the West-end. What was required there was a gentleman—a man of

address,—and the worthy wine merchant gave Captain Bellisham the post, undeterred by the damaging fact that he was held to have grossly mismanaged his accounts by those most competent judges the clerks of the Red-tape and Routine Office.

Captain Bellisham did his duty by his employer. He was so popular that customers came to the West-end department in shoals. The business was established on a permanent and extensive footing, and the worthy wine merchant found himself an immense gainer by the captain's appointment. Not being a Government Department, he determined to show his appreciation of the soldier's deserts. He raised the old boy's salary, and purchased a handsome annuity for Mrs. Bellisham, "in case of accidents."

Mrs. Bellisham had been exported to the marriage market in India as Miss Villafy, and had made capture of the gallant officer during a few months' leave on the hills.

She was an average sample of the female commodity which is shipped to India like Bass's pale ale, for the consumption of the British residents in that country. She was not plain, yet she was certainly not pretty; she was poor, she was pretentious, she was vain, and she married a man she did not care twopence about!

Only one little girl had been born to the captain, and she was at first a delicate child—so much so that it was on her account as much as to settle his regimental affairs that Bellisham came to England.

The worthy wine merchant had not long carried his kind intentions into effect before the old soldier's health broke down. He went to the seaside for a time, in hopes of recruiting his strength, but it was too late for Brighton to do him any good, though a stay at that fashionable town made Mrs. Bellisham feel quite herself again. She seemed to draw in fresh life with every breath she drew in of the air that is breathed

by fashionable society. Her husband, on the contrary, became paler and feebler every day, to her great distress; though whether her distress arose from the chance of losing her husband, or the knowledge that his death would bring her stay in Brighton to an end, I cannot pretend to determine.

At any rate, there came one still November day, when the sea looked half-curdled by the cold, and the sky was all one chilly lemon-yellow. On that day old Jack Bellisham, the founder of the Moondiebagh Irregular Cavalry, and the faithful servant of his country, retired—let us hope—upon full pay, such as he had never received for his services in this world. He died in his wife's arms, clasping his little girl's hand, and mingling with snatches of commands, addressed to his old troopers in Hindustanee, orders to the cellarman at the wine vaults to bring up some of that very old sherry, with the yellow seal. Jack Bellisham was

true to his duties, no matter how humble, down to his latest breath.

Mrs. Bellisham retired with her daughter to a quiet little village in Kent. She took a cottage there, and kept one old woman as servant. There she used to pinch, and pare, and stint for two-thirds of the year, eking out her annuity with so penurious a hand that she contrived to scrape up a little purse every autumn wherewith to take a brief holiday at the seaside. She said it was "for her darling Mary's sake—she saw so little society, and had so little pleasure." But Mary would far rather have dispensed with the visit to Brighton, which she hated. She would have infinitely preferred a little more home-comfort, during the chief part of the year, to a little flutter of gaiety and pretended opulence in the autumn.

Mrs. Bellisham used to cut rather a figure at Brighton, in a modest way. She used always to speak of her husband since his promotion to a better world as Colonel, and

she used to lead people to believe that he had been the governor of a district in India. Her great ambition was to net a rich—if possible, a titled—husband for Mary. She brought all her old Indian experience to bear on this subject, and she began scheming for a wealthy son-in-law as soon as her daughter was of a marriageable age.

She had plenty of opportunities of exercising her skill as a matrimonial netter in that delightfully fashionable place, Brighton. She began with a real lord, but she soon found the game flew a little too high, so she aimed at a live baronet. Failing him, she was content to spread her snares for the sons of rich bankers and merchants. Next to a title she revered money!

Now, there were plenty of men—men of wealth and position—who were smitten with Mary Bellisham's pretty face, but they all fled aghast from her match-making mother. They feared to speak to Mary lest her mother should trap them into an engagement before

they had time to satisfy themselves that Mary was as good as she was pretty.

“Mrs. B.,” in fact, became a byword among the men, and Mary was shunned. Not that she cared a bit for that, but her mother was angry at it, and scolded her as if it had been her fault. In fact, the widow was at a complete loss to discover why her wares hung on hand so. She began to think Mary must be very plain. “It’s a pity, my dear, you are not more like what I was at your age!” she would say at times. If there were any truth in a certain miniature which hung in the little drawing-room at home, Mary was to be congratulated on not resembling her mother as she appeared when her transcendent charms—coupled with the fact that she was the only unmarried lady at the station—made so deep an impression on the susceptible and ardent Captain Bellisham.

While, however, the mother was scheming and planning, the daughter had made her

choice. She had met Gervase Lane at a picnic, and he had paid her great attention. Her mother had been too ill (for which, please, read "indisposed") to go, but had sent Mary, under charge of a married and elderly lady, because there was to be an Honourable present. The Honourable was present, and was also attentive; but he was such a spooney that Mary quietly shunned him—a process by which Gervase benefited, as it threw her in his way.

A picnic, properly mismanaged, is one of the best pieces of match-making machinery I know. Young hearts seem to be drawn together by the common sorrow at the omission of the salt; and the absence of the corkscrew appears to awaken the tenderest chords of sympathy. But when the disasters are more startling—when, for instance, there has been a smash in the crockery department, and in consequence of there not being plates enough, the young folk have to go shares, to sip sherry out of the same glass,

to have a joint-stock supply of sandwiches—these things are battle, murder, and sudden matrimony, and do fierce havoc among the susceptible, the tender, the youthful.

The picnic at which Mary and Gervase met was not such a very violent case as this, but the two saw enough of each other to wish to see more, and as a natural result they contrived to let each other know their favourite haunts and pet walks. That is easily done. In this way, for instance:—

“ Oh, Mr. Lane, how very lovely that view is ! ” says Mary, pointing to a green slope stretching from a fir plantation to a little brawling brook.

“ It is exquisite ! ” is the answer.

“ It reminds me so of the beach just by ” &c., &c. ; there being in reality not a shadow of resemblance between the greensward, dark trees, and little silvery brook on one hand, and the grey cliffs, pebbly shore, and dark waves on the other. But then the mention of the beach allows of Gervase’s asking,

"Do you like that bit of the shore? I know it very well" (a fib); "I think I have seen you walking there."

"Oh, yes, I frequently wander in that direction; it is so—" &c., &c.

Of course they both wander in that direction the next day—and the next—and so on, until they have become "Gervase" and "Mary," until there is a lingering in the handshake when they part. Of course that can't last long; so there is a confession of love, and a long, long talk about the past, the present, and the future; and finally it occurs to them that there is a certain Mrs. Bellisham living, who will probably take some interest in the case.

So it is determined that Gervase shall call on Mary's mother and plead his suit. He does not know what the mother is like, for the daughter is silent about her faults—perhaps ignorant of them, since love at times is merciful, and binds our eyes with the bandage taken from his own, that we may not

see the foibles of those near and dear to us.

Gervase, therefore, was in high spirits when he called next day on Mrs. Bellisham and asked her daughter's hand.

That extremely wise lady refrained from making any observation until she learnt what our friend's means and expectations were. Finding he was only probable heir of a wealthy uncle, and that he was not even distantly heir to a title, that he was a member of a profession by which not many fortunes are made, and that, therefore, the marriage of her daughter was only a remote contingency, Mrs. Bellisham was the very reverse of friendly. At first she refused to listen to the engagement, but she at last gave way to her daughter, who, being summoned into the maternal presence, confessed, with a sweet simplicity and maiden modesty, that she loved Gervase Lane, and wished to be his wife, and no other's.

"Mrs. B." was too wise a woman to resort

to open opposition. She gave a conditional assent; but surrounded her permission with so many provisos, that only two silly young people over head and ears in love could have been blind to her intentions.

The visit to Brighton was curtailed, very shortly. Mamma alleged that her little stock of money was exhausted, and they must go home again. So Mary and Gervase parted, with infinite regret. Absence could not entirely separate them, they felt, as long as the penny post existed; so they submitted to their fate, and wrote long letters to each other nearly every day.

Gervase returned to his chambers in the Temple, with a vague idea of sticking to work, and being called to the bar one week and to the Woolsack the next. He certainly did read, but not with any excessive zeal;—long letters written and received almost daily are apt to make a hole in valuable time.

Matters were at this stage when Gervase

learnt from his uncle's lawyers that his uncle was about to marry. The announcement that his uncle was about to marry was, he saw at a glance, the announcement that he—Gervase—was *not* about to marry; and therefore it was that he asked Bartlett to come and see him on the Sunday evening spoken of in the last chapter.

“Good-bye, Bartlett,” said Gervase, looking into Bartlett's chambers as he passed on the following Saturday. “Good-bye. I'm off to be my own executioner!” and he gave a sickly attempt at a smile, hurried to the gate, carpet-bag in hand, and made his way to the railway station. He proposed staying a day or two at St. Maud's Cray, where Mrs. Bellisham lived, and then going on to his uncle's wedding from there.

“Paper, sir!” said a small newsboy, as Gervase seated himself in the carriage.

“Yes, give me *The Illustrated*—or no! stop, I'll take *All the Year Round*.”

"Yes, sir," said the boy, handing-in the required article. Gervase glanced at it—on the first page his eye fell upon "Great Expectations!"

"Confound great expectations!" said Gervase, very heartily, to the astonishment of his fellow-passengers, who were not aware of the real application of his words; "confound great expectations!"

CHAPTER V.

LOST, A THOUSAND POUNDS.

MR. MOLEWARP took his mug of beer with the air of a man satisfied with his morning's work. Then he seated himself on the edge of a box which served John as a corn-bin, took out a little black cigar-case, selected a cigar from it, lit it, and began to smoke.

"Now, then, my man," said he, "we'll just finish off a few points, and then I'll put the case to you. What's this chap called himself that's gone?"

"Charles Lewis," said John, who had spelt out the name on the valise as he carried it upstairs.

Molewarp made a note of it in his pocket-book.

"Now, where the deuce has he picked up that?" said he. "Charles Lewis! He's a-driving at something, that's clear enough, but hang me if I can guess what it is just at this minute. Let's see, my man! How was he dressed?"

"Well, clothes dark, and nigh new," said John.

"Aha! That's it, then. Now, I wonder whose clothes they were."

"His own, I guess. Fit of 'em was good."

"My good chap, the last suit as he was measured for was regular Dartmoor cut—convict togs, you see. Now he's made a swop of them somewhere, and it's my suspicion, considering as people are not often very anxious to put on them togs, why, he came by his present suit along of a bit of robbery from the person with violence—not to say murder. If so, we shall hear more of

it, I suppose. But by that time I shall have got him sure and safe."

And Mr. Molewarp blew a long blue cloud from between his compressed lips, and watched it fade quietly in the fresh morning air.

"Did any one see him besides you—any one staying in the house, for instance?"

"No. Only the maid."

"Ah! she's no use, and don't you say anything to her about it. Silence in these cases is of the very greatest importance, and women's tongues will wag. Nobody in the house, I think you told me? Did he sit in the coffee-room?"

"No."

"Commercial-room?"

"No."

"Oh, a private room, eh? Well, these chaps sometimes are particular. I should have thought, now, after having had so much of a small private room at Dartmoor"—here Mr. Molewarp gave vent to a little chuckle at

his own humorous way of speaking of a cell—
“I should have thought he’d have been glad of a little company. But, you see, it’s difficult to break yourself of a habit or fancy. Just draw me another mug, friend. There’s no hurry, for he’s afoot, and I’m on horseback; and I can guess the line he’ll take. Bless you,” he added, seeing John look at him doubtfully, “it’s just ‘hare and hounds,’ all the world over. Your hare takes big jumps, and all that, but he drops a paper trail wherever he goes, and you’re sure to get up with him at last. I could point you out on the map the very line that chap’s taking. First of all, as soon as he gets off Dartmoor he makes for the least frequented parts along here; but he’ll try to get hid in a crowd now.

He must have took the alarm somehow, and he’ll get off to Braxted, and run into the crowd to try and throw me off the scent. But he won’t, you know. He won’t! He’s a smart fellow, but he won’t

put Jack Molewarp off his track quite as easy as he thinks."

Here John left the stable for the mug of beer.

"Now I wonder," said Molewarp to himself, when he was left alone, "what the deuce it was that scared him. I'm more than half inclined to think I must have over-shot him somewhere on the road, and that he may have passed me unbeknown somewhere, and took the alarm. It's odd I should have let him give me the go-by; but it's the only thing I can see—unless he wanted to clear off without paying his bill here. That's like enough, and if so, he'll not be far ahead."

John returning with the beer, Mr. Molewarp refreshed himself with another pull, wiping his mouth after it artistically with the back of his hand.

John looked on quietly. He was waiting for the story Molewarp had promised him, but as the detective seemed in no hurry to

begin it, and the morning was wearing on, John thought it well to jog that worthy's memory.

"Who be he?" said John, jerking his head in the direction of the house—alluding to the open window which stood for the departed guest.

"Well, I'll tell you. He's one o' my chaps. It's part o' my business to see chaps as break the laws into the safe keeping of the turnkey, and a precious lot of 'em I have helped to put under lock and key in my time. Some of 'em don't cost much trouble. It's just a matter of a bit of search, and then I get 'em, and then they're in the dock and passed on to jail before you could well say Jack Robinson. But some of 'em are sly—regular deep ones, and they set their wits to mine. I like that—it's like a game of draughts, you know. I always nick 'em in the end, and I never forget a chap that I've had a bit of trouble with like that. Now, this chap is one of these fellows. He

was one of the very artfullest cards I ever locked the darbies on. Innocent! Why, lor' bless you, you'd as soon have accused the babe unborn of subornation o' perjury as fancy that chap would have stolen the value of a brass farthing. Artful! As artful as he's high. Now that's the sort of chap I'm proud of nailing. It's some credit to get the upper hand of 'em—they're as slippery as eels, those chaps are. Bless you, I never did believe as I could convict him, and I shouldn't if one of our men—he's in the A division now, and likely to rise, he is—hadn't give his evidence pretty conclusive. A deal depends on how you give evidence, you see. If you don't happen to know what to give and what not to give, you may often turn evidence for the defence afore you know where you are."

"Oh," said John, seeing the other paused as if for a reply.

"You may, indeed! I've seen it done often. But when a fellow nearly gives me

the slip, as this fellow did, I never take my eye off him. He's a marked man for life, he is, for when Jack Molewarp has his eye on a chap he'd better not commit a petty larceny, even in a dream, for I'm on him like a thousand of bricks. When the news came to head-quarters as Number Sixty-four had broke out, I remembered he was a particular friend of mine, so I applied for the job—and here I am."

"What's he done?" said John.

"His employer," said Molewarp, with another chuckle at the brilliancy of his own wit. "He was confidential clerk, he was. lor' bless ye, I've seen some very rum fellows taken on as confidential clerks in my time. I've known 'em that confidential they'd cut their masters' throats quite privately, and keep the secret very profound, you know. Not as this one had the pluck to do that; he didn't cut throats; he bled, he did—bled his master to the tune of some hundreds. This was how it was. One

morning an elderly gentleman comes and asks for a smart detective, and they, natural, referred him to me. 'Mr. Molewarp,' he says, 'I'm in a regular puzzle.' 'Are ye?' says I, 'then just you tell me what about, sir, and I'll see if I can't p'int it out to ye.' So he tells me all about it. It seems he was a lawyer in Bedford Row, and managed several large estates, and had in consequence a heap of money always passing through his hands. This here confidential clerk of his, and he, looked to that department, leaving the general business to some junior clerks under this gentleman's nephew, as were partner. Well, he'd fancied as he lost money on one or two occasions—notes and such—but he'd never been sure till about three months before, when fifty pounds vanished like smoke, all in a instant. He didn't say anything at the time, but he grew suspicious, and kept a sharp look-out, and now he'd lost a thousand pounds at one go, so he determined to have the matter cleared

up. Well, I saw from inquiries I put to him that there was only four people that were able to do the trick. There was himself—oh,” said Molewarp, with a grin, noticing that John was taken aback at the idea of a man robbing himself—“I’ve known parties as picked their own pockets, bless you! I once knew a bankrupt as was without assets along of burglars having broken open his safe and stole a deal of money—why, bless you, he was the only burglar concerned in that job! However, as I was saying, there were only four that could have had the old gent’s money—himself, his nephew, his confidential clerk, and a young lad, a sort of messenger, who was often in and out of the old boy’s room. Well, I found out, artful, through some questions as I put, that he himself was remarkable well off, so he’d no call to rob himself. Then I kept a eye on the nephew. He didn’t bet nor play, nor anything of that sort—a very quiet humdrum fellow, so I saw

he wasn't likely to do it, and that narrowed the ground a deal. But I couldn't quite see which it was of the other two—they were both poor, and they were both trusted in implicit !”

Here, Mr. Molewarp paused to refresh himself with another pull at the beer and to light a fresh cigar. That done, he resumed his narrative.

“To make a long story short, I says to the old gentleman as he wasn't to say a word about my coming to him, but I'd drop in next day, and he was to have first the clerk and then the boy up. I called next morning, and was shown into his office, and he pointed out where he stowed the money in the top drawer on the right-hand side of his office desk—one of them pedestal desks with five drawers on each side. The locks were right enough—and the money was gone. I took out the drawer, and looked behind it, but the note wasn't there. So then we had in the clerk. When his employer told him who I

was, he gave a little start and a stare, which I thought looked bad. But I didn't say anything, but got him into a talk about who had access to the rooms, and at last I says, 'Well, then, it's that lad ; and if you'll send him up here I'll do the business with him in a twinkling.' Well, he turned quite white, and shook all over, and began saying as he knew it wasn't the boy. 'Is that boy any relation of yours ?' I asked ; and he said he wasn't. 'I'm glad of it, for his sake,' says I, 'for I'm going to take *you* for this little job ;' and with that I slips on the darbies and had him like a shot ! He burst out a-crying—that was his artfulness. 'I'll take that bunch of keys of yours,' I says, quite quiet, taking 'em out of his pocket. Well, I tried 'em, and one of 'em, with a little management, opened the drawer. 'There,' says I to the old gent, 'I told you I'd clear up this mystery, didn't I ? Next time you have a confidential,' I says, 'I hope he'll be better nor this !' With that I

walked him off, him a-protesting his innocence all the time as a matter of course. I got up the case very careful, for I saw he was dead artful; but he'd have given me the slip then if it hadn't been for the constable I spoke of, who swore to what he said, when I 'got him to the station, and had warned him what he said would be used against him. Of course *he* swore as he didn't say so; but that policeman and I we heard him, and that and the bunch of keys settled the question. I tried very hard to get out of him what he'd done with the money; but, bless you, he was as close as nails, and kept on saying he knew nothing about it. He was convicted, though the jury was a long time making up their minds, and got his sentence, and was sent to Dartmoor; and he broke out the other day—very cleverly I can tell you—and he's off; but not for long. And, now, what should you think was his game?"

And the officer looked inquiringly at John,

who only shook his head slowly by way of answer.

“Then I’ll tell ye! He’s off to get that note, and he’ll change it, and start for foreign parts, if he can. For he’s got that note hid away somewhere. It’s never got to the Bank again, and we’ve advertised the number and done all we can, but it’s never turned up—and it’s my belief he’s got it somewhere put away safe, and if he can get at it, and change it, he’ll be off—his wife went abroad after the trial, and I dare say he told her, meaning to join her with the money as soon as he could.”

At this moment the yard bell rang to summon John to the parlour, so Molewarp and he had to part. The latter untied his horse and got into the saddle.

“You’d better keep that nag there. It’s stolen, and no doubt its owner ’ll be inquiring for it. In the meantime mum’s the word. And just you keep in mind all as happened when this fellow came, what he

said and did, for I shall want you, you know, at the trial, just to show how exact I guessed the line he'd hit off. It's all practice, you know—experience and that! But, lor', juries is a great deal influenced by these things;—if they see that an officer is active and intelligent, bless you, they're twice as ready to take his word for a thing. So good-day to you. And keep this matter quiet—I don't want to alarm my bird more than I can help."

With these words Molewarp rode off, and John went indoors.

CHAPTER VI.

A LITTLE LOVE-MAKING.

ST. MAUD'S CRAY was a quiet little village, lying about six miles from the railway. It was bosomed in a green Kentish valley, where the cherry orchards were white in spring, and the hops pitched their green tents. A tiny flashing brook meandered along it, with a plenteous population of darting trout, that brought many an angler to the village.

Gervase had not paid many visits to Maud's Cray. Mrs. Bellisham did not care to have any one prying into the petty meanesses she had to practise at home; and, apart from that, was the better pleased the

less she saw of Gervase. He had, however, on more than one occasion made a fishing-rod, which had somehow fallen into his possession, the excuse for a week or so's stay at a village not far from St. Maud's Cray. He had sought the stream daily with a perseverance that would have charmed old Isaak Walton—and not least, because Gervase never caught anything.

The fact was that Mary used to make the valley her walk; and somehow, when a charming girl meets you by a trout stream, the notion of trout is apt to become undefined, especially if you happen be only about five-and-twenty.

Gervase had written to Mary to meet him in the valley when he went down to tell Mrs. Bellisham of the sudden and terrible change in his prospects. He wished to tell Mary of it before he saw her mother, having a vague idea that that lady might order him out of the house the moment she learnt he was what she would have called "an unprincipled

beggar." It's astonishing what a crime some people consider poverty !

Our traveller did not read much, in spite of his literary purchases, on his road down this time. He sat with the paper before him, but the print was only a grey mist to him—his eyes were seeking far beyond to read the future.

"It takes such years to get anything like a position at the Bar—and I don't know any attorneys who would give me briefs. I've no chance like Watkins, who was being chaffed in hall the other day about only getting briefs when he was at his native place. And even if I did get a brief, I should not know how to treat it, for I've not opened a law book for ages ; I've even forgotten the "Blackstone on Real Property," which I took in for my Law and History Examination. It's a poor look-out enough ; and upon my word, I don't like to call Mrs. B. worldly for objecting to Mary's becoming engaged to a man with such mise-

rable prospects. I should be worldly, too, if I had a daughter who was similarly placed."

In this way Gervase mused as the train went jarring and rattling along, the noise of the wheels and chains, the clatter of the windows, revolving themselves into a monotonous rhythm, in which by-and-by he seemed to hear the words, "Poor chap!—not a penny! Poor chap!—not a penny!" as though these inanimate things were taunting him with his poverty.

At last, however, the weary journey drew near its end, and the train stopped at the station at which he had to get out.

He was glad to quit the stuffy compartment and the noisy rattle for the quiet of the country.

How lovely it looked! Before him lay the green valley, winding in and out with its hop plantations and nut copses—its bright meadows, and rows of elms. The sky was a clear blue overhead, without a single cloud to

break its serenity ; and the tiny brook caught the rare colour, and gleamed like a strip of heaven as it flowed on down the happy valley.

And how cheery the birds were ! There was not a bush or a tree that had not its songster. Here a thrush, there a linnet—here a woodlark, and there a finch ; while the cuckoo, that mysterious, ubiquitous bird, uttered his note, first on one side, and then on the other—now near at hand, and the next instant far, far away.

The noise of the train had died out in the distance, and Nature seemed to be undisturbed monarch of the place. Rural noises—the sweet sounds of the country—were audible all around ; the low of kine, the tinkle of a sheep bell, with the occasional bleating of sheep, the creak of a waggon-wheel in a lane, the song of some worker afield—were borne on the wings that wafted with them the odour of a thousand exquisite flowers.

What a lovely place it seemed, miles away from the roar and trouble of life! Gervase gave a sigh.

"If one could but live in a spot like this, with no cares, no anxieties—only a tiny cottage, and a plot of garden-ground! Why, I envy these fellows here."

And he gave another sigh as he passed a couple of carters, who were whistling as they strode along by their teams.

But as if to remind our friend that there is no perfect calm in this world, and that, with all its seeming peace, the valley was not free really from the fever of life, there suddenly grew a sound—from a dull hum to a prolonged roar and rattle—and then came a long shriek and a trail of white steam as the "up express" tore by through the station he had just quitted, thundered over the little bridge that spanned the brook, and hurried towards the busy city.

"No, I suppose there *is* no escape from trouble," said Gervase, "unless it be in work,

as old Bartlett insists. I wish I had his pluck and his capacity for work: it must be a specific for worry, for he's cheerful enough; yet he has had to give up what men dream about in youth, in order to make a home for his mother and sisters. I must try to learn his philosophy; but it's hard—it's very hard!"

At this moment philosophy, and sorrow, and good resolutions were blown to the winds; for lo! at a turn of the footpath that followed the course of the brook there was a dainty little figure to be seen, and that figure, as Gervase's heart told him, was **Mary**.

She was dressed in a pretty morning wrapper, with an Indian scarf round her shoulders, and she wore a bewitching little straw hat, with blue ribbons. It was a picture for an artist, as she stood with the dancing shadows of the elm branches overhead dappling the sward at her feet, making stray sunbeams flutter about her like golden

butterflies, while the little brook below forgot the blue sky for a moment, to mirror back the charming picture.

As soon as she saw Gervase, she hurried forward with a merry little laugh and a cry of pleasure.

I shall leave my readers to imagine the meeting. All those who care to know how the two lovers greeted one another will have no difficulty in learning from their own hearts. Those whose hearts cannot tell them what happens when two lovers that have been long divided meet again, cannot really care to know anything about it.

It was some time before Gervase could summon up courage to break the ill news to Mary, so he let her prattle artlessly on about the thousand and one subjects in which they had a common interest—from the canary bird he had given her on her last birthday, to mamma's state of mind, and where the autumn seaside trip would take them; and how soon those wonderful slippers would be

done; not to mention the gorgeous smoking cap with a gold tassel.

It was not until they had come to the borders of St. Maud's Cray that Gervase mustered courage to approach, even, the topic which was occupying his mind in spite of his efforts to feel contented and happy.

"Do you mind turning back a bit? We may as well prolong our walk for a time," said he.

"Oh, no; but mamma will be expecting us. She desired me to say—don't smile, you naughty boy, but she is particular on these points—that she should be happy to see you this evening to tea."

"She *will* be happy to see me this evening—for once. Happier than she hopes," said Gervase, bitterly.

"What do you mean?"

"That I am wretched."

"Gervase, what has happened?"

"The worst."

"Your uncle——"

"Yes!"

"Dead?"

"No. Worse."

"What? Do speak, Gervase!"

"Married—or about to be."

"Well, poor man, why shouldn't he?"

"Oh, Mary, there's no reason why he shouldn't. He's quite a free man. But you don't seem to see what this means."

"I confess I do not."

"Why, it means that he is going to allowance me—for a few years only—just enough to keep me going at my profession. Then he stops the pay, and I must do as I can."

"But you can, and will, work."

"With pleasure; but will your mother take this change in my prospects as calmly as you do?"

There was a pause.

"Oh, Gervase! I had never thought of that."

"I have; and I know what it means. We shall have to part, Mary, darling."

"Gervase!" It was all she could say; but she clung to his arm with a despairing gesture, and stopped.

It was a quiet and sequestered spot, so Gervase had nothing for it but to take her to his heart and kiss her.

"Cheer up, my pretty. While there's life there's hope. We must hope for the best."

"Oh, but *will* mamma insist on the breaking off of our engagement?"

"She will have every right to do so. Indeed, looking at it from her point of view, she would not—there! I must confess it—be justified in doing anything else."

"Oh dear! oh dear!" and Mary fairly broke down. Gervase could only repeat the former process of comforting.

"Tell me all about it, Gervase."

"There's little to tell. You know my uncle has educated me, and it was always understood I was to be his heir. But it seems he has met with some French lady

—a Countess, indeed—who has altered his views, and he is about to marry.”

“He is an old man, is he not?”

“Well, he’s far from young; but there’s no fool like an old—no! that’s ungrateful. He has been a second father to me, and deserves better at my hands. He was not bound to do anything for me. I ought to be grateful that he has done so much, instead of angry that he will not do more.”

“He’s rich. Won’t he continue the allowance longer, and give you a better chance?”

“I could not ask him. But even if he did, I know your mother would not consent to your marrying a beggar.”

“A beggar! Why, Gervase, you have nearly double as much as mamma.”

“Possibly, but she does not regard the question in that light, child. You might marry well—you’re fit to marry a king—I doubt if any king deserves such happiness! And she naturally thinks—well,

never mind what she thinks. She won't hear of it."

"But what do you suppose she thinks?"

"I won't pain you by telling you."

"You pain me more by not telling me!"

"Well, she possibly pictures to herself a home for her daughter which will be luxurious and happy—and which will be large enough to leave room for her."

"Poor mamma! You know I am all she has. Her friends have died or passed away, and she has nothing left to care for but me. I must not be ungrateful.

"You could not, darling. But it's very hard to think of what is coming."

Mary shuddered—she had forgotten the true meaning of Gervase's news. It came back on her heart like a blow.

"Is there no hope, Gervase?"

"None!"

"Oh, Gervase, what a pity you haven't worked a little harder."

"I've never worked at all, Mary, I'm

ashamed to say. I have trusted to this possible inheritance. I'm a fool."

"But it is hard to be disappointed. Do you think your uncle has thought how sorely he deceives you?"

"Stay—fair play for uncle as well as mother. My uncle has a right to think that if he has led me to hope for his money, he has also given me chances of earning money for myself. He has given me an education and a start I should not otherwise have had. Even reckoning the disappointment, I am better off twenty times than I should have been if he had not generously stepped in to help me."

"Gervase, you ought to get on in your profession; for you have a calm, judicial mind, that metes most even-handed justice to all."

"You don't know what my profession is, child. I want a biassed and prejudiced mind to get on as a barrister. The judicial mind is no aid to the aspirant;—he only

needs judicial qualities when he has got the reward of his labours. A man has to work his way up as a partisan and a pleader, and when long practice has thoroughly habituated him to that, he is rewarded by being called upon to be strictly impartial and unimpassioned. But that's 'shop,' my love, as we elegantly term it in the Temple. Meantime, here we are within two turns of the village. We must bear our troubles as we best can, and be true to each other."

"Oh, *my* Gervase! What shall I do without you!"

"My Mary!"

And over that scene, if you please, as over the first meeting of the two lovers, we will let fall the curtain. To attempt to describe it would be but dire failure. I'm afraid you will find the love dialogue I have given you tame and commonplace enough. It is, nevertheless, true, to the best of my belief. Passion is the more homely the truer it is; and one reason why I have shirked

the meeting and parting is that there was so little said. Eyes and lips have a silent language which the best type that was ever cast—"old-faced" of the purest fount—would struggle in vain to reproduce.

CHAPTER VII.

A CHARMING BROTHER AND SISTER.

MARK LANE's chateau was situated on a vine-clad slope looking down on Vieuxville, which stands on the Vaire, about five miles from its mouth. Vieuxville lies out of the route of the ordinary tourist—the luckier, perhaps, for Vieuxville, but not for the tourist, since it is a remarkably pretty little town, with some quaint nooks and corners that would be lions if the tourist came, but are lambs in his absence.

Vieuxville has a sort of Piræus at the mouth of the Vaire, a small fishing village called Barsât, whither the good townspeople of Vieuxville migrate at stated intervals, and

where they gravely rig themselves out in all sorts of eccentric costumes, and bathe with great ceremony, not to say pomp.

Mark Lane was greatly admired—perhaps I should say beloved by the simple folk. He gave himself no airs, was very courteous to his neighbours, extremely kind to the poor, and, above all, he had rescued a young girl from drowning. She had gone out a little too far, had lost her head and then her feet, and was drifting out to sea. The population were wringing their hands, and gesticulating on the beach. The fishermen were hauling at their boats, which were beached, and could not have been got off in time. Mark Lane plunged in, clothed as he was, and fetched the frightened girl out. When he brought her to land, he was, I believe, kissed instanter by the entire population, male and female, and from that hour he became the hero of Barsât. It was quite a sight to note the inhabitants turning out to behold *ce brave Anglais* going out for a swim on occasions

when the authorities forbade any one else to bathe—a prohibition which was quite unnecessary, for no one desired to do so, though there really was no danger of more than a rough slap in the face from a wave awkwardly encountered. But then one can see at once from the size of their washing-basins that the French are a people not at home in the water.

Another occupation of the visitors to the little seaport was to watch Mark Lane manoeuvring a little yacht he had. She was a tiny little boat, very small, with only a half deck; but she was a clever little craft, and he could sail her admirably by the aid of a couple of lads, of whom he was rapidly making good sailors.

I don't know what they would have found to amuse them at Barsât if the Englishman had not been there. There would have been nothing for them to do in the intervals of bathing (which were long) except billiards and knitting, for the two sexes respectively.

As it was, he not only gave them something to look at, but something to chatter about, which was still more important ; the genius of the French language being its chatterableness, if I may be allowed the word.

There were at times, it is true, arrivals of distinguished visitors. Strangers would occasionally put up for a few weeks at the Hotel du Monde—so called, probably, because it was as much out of the world as it was, usually, out of anything else that the traveller required. Generally speaking—or perhaps I should say captainly speaking—these visitors were officers *en retraite*, whose means were retired too. There was also a sprinkling of shopkeepers from large towns in the district, who did not care for the more fashionable haunts along the coast. Now and then the little place would be dazzled by the arrival of carriages and fourgons with gorgeous lackeys.

This last class of arrivals was styled by the irreverent inhabitants of Barsât “the

patients of Dr. Bourse-Vide." It was their subduedly humorous way of hinting that the distinguished visitors had pitched upon Barsât on economical grounds. Fortunately it had the reputation of being extremely salubrious, so that the poor swells could describe themselves as ordered thither by their doctor, without stating that that doctor was the amiable but exacting physician above alluded to.

Mark Lane had, in spite of herself, become sufficiently acquainted with the language to be on speaking terms with his neighbours. He made delicious bumbles sometimes, but with the happiest unconsciousness; for those with whom he conversed knew French to be the grandest tongue under the sun, and felt it would be too much to expect a mere Englishman to master it in a lifetime only.

In consequence of this polite reticence, our friend went on unabashed to master the language by violence, and was at

length, in his own estimation, a duly qualified linguist.

His old sense of desolation, and his desire for complete isolation, were—as it was only natural and right they should—dying out by degrees. He was more than once tempted to write over to England, and have his nephew to live with him. But he did not like to call the lad away from his studies.

His old cronies had died out, disappeared, or married, so he could get no friends from his old home—they are not articles you can have exported on speculation. He therefore determined to set about making some in his new home.

The task was not a difficult one. The good people were ready enough to receive him with open arms, and make a sort of little king of him. He became one of the institutions of Barsât, and, in consequence, it devolved on him, as a species of duty, to do the honours of the place to all distinguished visitors. The task was not an

unpleasant one to Mark, whose nature was a generous and hospitable one.

I am not enough of a man-of-science—or brewer—to know whether it is a fact that the sweeter the wort the stronger the working ; but I know that the better the temper the more violent the fermentation when it does take place. Mark's disappointment in love had turned a kindly disposition to gall and wormwood. A less sound spirit would have become confirmed vinegar ; but his, like good wine, though it was sick for a time, settled down and cleared, and improved in due course of years.

He was really glad, then, to find himself drifted back into the current of human life again, and took a warm interest in the doings of Vieuxville and Barsât. He introduced cricket, and established athletic sports, though not without some difficulty. However, he was not a man to be discouraged by trifles, and he always declared that if it had taken half his life and half his

fortune to found the "*jeux athlétiques*," he would have been more than repaid by the sight of a hurdle-race he once got up among some French Zouaves, whose running and jumping in their red baggy breeches, was, he declared, one of the funniest things he ever witnessed.

It was at a display of athletics that our friend first made the acquaintance of Madame la Comtesse de Miancourt.

She was *en route* to Baden, escorted by her brother, a *sous-lieutenant* in the Austrian service; but was detained by ill-health at Vieuxville, whence she made a descent upon Barsât, and took up her quarters at the Hôtel du Monde.

She spoke English fairly enough, which delighted Mark. She had spent some time in England, she told him, and seemed to have moved in good society, though she made some terrible hashes of our titles, as foreigners will do. Her brother had less acquaintance with the English tongue:

indeed, he had learnt all he knew of his sister, herself no proficient. But she loved our language—so she assured Mark—and did her best to impart it to her brother.

She took a great interest in the games, having, she declared, first acquired a taste for such spectacles by assisting at some muscular festivities at what Mark concluded from her description was Holland Park, though she was under the impression it was Kensington Palace.

Mark became very attentive, and the Countess seemed to appreciate his *petits soins*.

Her brother appeared to have a passion for billiards, and spent his whole day at the game. He was an extremely good player, and had extraordinary luck, as his adversaries had reason to know—I was going to say full reason, but the term scarcely seems applicable to an empty pocket. Soldiers, they said, have such opportunities in these peaceful times for ac-

quiring skill in billiards, that poor provincials have no chance against them.

Owing to the absence of René—for that was the *sous-lieutenant's* name—Clémence the Countess and Mark Lane were thrown together, *tête-à-tête*, pretty often.

The Countess was going to Baden for her health, but she declared she hated that noisy, crowded place, and found the sea air at Barsât was quite as beneficial as the German waters, so she prolonged her stay indefinitely—a determination, by the way, which delighted mine host of the Hôtel du Monde, until he discovered an apparent inclination on Madame's part not to settle her bill till she went away. He consoled himself, however, with the reflection that she was a friend of Monsieur Lane, and so it must be all right. He was not, of course, aware that the Englishman had no further acquaintance with the Countess than an accidental one formed at the *jeux athlétiques*.

Madame talked English, and the obvious conclusion was that she had been in England, and therefore knew monsieur. Besides, I'm bound to admit that the acquaintance ripened with such rapidity that you would have supposed the two had been intimate friends for years.

I have told you Lane had a yacht, and was very fond of being on the water. To his delight he found the Countess was a capital sailor, and passionately addicted to yachting. He of course placed the *Spray* at her disposal at once, and proposed taking her for a trip; but the lady—perhaps with some idea of propriety—did not seem very ready to close with the proposal. She put off the expedition from day to day with so many excuses that he grew quite disappointed. Seeing this, the Countess named a day for a sail; but somehow all her seamanship seemed to have deserted her, for she turned a livid green before she had been on the water five minutes, and was so horribly ill that Mark

had to put about at once and carry her ashore.

On reaching the hotel, he found René smoking a cigar in the doorway; and that gallant officer, on hearing the cause of his sister's indisposition, shrugged his shoulders and told her he could not pity her.

"It was *bêtise*. She *would* insist on going to sea at every opportunity, though the doctors had told her that with her complaint it was most inadvisable!"

"But she had always loved it so, and it never used to harm her," urged the fair invalid.

"True, she had been a complete *marine*; but, *sapristi*, illnesses changed circumstances."

So there was an end of the projected yachting trips, greatly to Mark Lane's disappointment.

The only thing which came of the unsuccessful attempt was the recital by the Countess of her former life. She had been brought up in a convent, whence she was

taken to become the bride of a man she had never seen. She was married to the Count de Miancourt; who was old enough to be her grandfather, and left her a widow in her eighteenth year. She had never been a wife, but a nurse, she told Mark, and talked with a sigh about love, and domestic happiness, and other dangerous topics. She introduced the subject by mentioning that the Count had been a brother-officer of her father's, who was an admiral, and had frequently taken her with him for a cruise in his flag-ship.

The day after the failure of the proposed trip in the *Spray*, the Countess was completely recovered, and she entreated Mark to let her see the yacht sail. "If he would go out and put the darling little ship through her manœuvres, she would be so delighted to watch it, though, alas! she could not enjoy the pleasure of going on board."

Mark of course consented, and in a quarter of an hour the *Spray* was tacking up

and down before Barsât in first-rate style. Mark was proud of his yacht, and he took pleasure in showing what she could do, charmed at the thought of the fine eyes that were watching him with such interest from the shore.

It is just possible he would have been sorely disappointed if he had seen how little heed the fine eyes were taking of him and his boat.

The Countess had rambled to the least frequented part of the shore, where the little fleet of fishing boats had been drawn high and dry above tide-line.

There was a worn, anxious look about her face, and her eyes were oftener bent on the sand than on the sea. It is true she glanced at the *Spray* from time to time, but it was rather with the air of one who watched with a hope that the boat was not putting back immediately.

In plain truth, the Countess was waiting an interview with her brother, who shortly

made his appearance, and took his seat on the gunwale of the boat against which she was leaning.

There was a pause for a few seconds, neither seeming to know how to begin. At last the Countess broke silence.

"Well, René, hast thou won anything?" she said, using the caressing "thou," as if she wished to propitiate her brother.

"*Sacré!* No. These fools of bourgeois have an idea that a soldier—a soldier! bah!—has so much leisure to learn the game that they have no chance with him. Besides, their pitiful stakes are scarcely worth picking up."

"What is to be done? We cannot leave without paying. One could not leave this miserable out-of-the-way place without being observed."

"Not when one is hampered with a woman. That being the case, you must devise the means, since but for you I could get away with ease."

"Réné, you would not leave me?" asked the woman, with a pained air of suspicion.

"My faith, no!" he said, as if some one had asked him to abandon a good speculation because there was a panic, and the money market was temporarily "tight," as the slang of the Stock Exchange has it.

"Tell me—what I can do?" she said, earnestly.

"This English fool! He is rich. He is foolish about your fine eyes. Do you understand?"

"You would have me ask *him*? How can I? He would be surprised that the widow of a Count, the child of an Admiral in the French navy, should be in want of money."

"Bah! You have an extravagant brother who has gambled away your money, and your rents are not due—your pension not payable yet. You are not usually destitute of a lie."

"Réné, *you* should not say this to me!" and the fine eyes filled with tears.

"*Ma chère*, love and truth should go together. We live by lying and chicane. Why disguise it to ourselves?"

"It is bitter!"

"See here. You go to borrow of this English fool. Know you what follows?"

"No. What, René?"

"He lays his all at your feet."

"And I——"

"Accept him."

"And *you* counsel this, René—*my* René!"

"Certainly. You will persuade your brother to sell his commission and come and reside with you. Shall I not be always with you?"

"True, René; but it will be a terrible life;—and he, will he not suspect?"

"Is he not English? Is he not brute? Bah!"

"You will it—it is enough, René! But you will not leave me—you will not cast me off?"

"How you babble! Have I cast you off

in our times of difficulty and poverty? Is it probable that I shall leave you when you are rich?"

"You will not leave me, because you love me. Is it not so, my René?"

"Yes, certainly. I love you. I love riches and comfort, too. But, see! This great English fool is coming to shore again. I shall absent myself to-night until late. If all has gone right, when I come in, you will make me a cigarette and hand me."

"Well, if it must be to-night!"

The gallant officer had strolled back to his billiards by the time Mark Lane had brought the *Spray* again to her moorings. As soon as he had made her fast, he hastened to the Countess, and listened with almost boyish delight to her praise of his boat and his seamanship.

* * * * *

It was late when Lieutenant René returned to the Hôtel du Monde. He found his sister

and the Englishman seated at an open window looking over the moonlit bay.

The Countess bade him welcome, and, rising, took a pinch of tobacco from an embroidered pouch on the mantelpiece, and rolled a cigarette, which she presented to the lieutenant.

"You are late, bad boy, and you don't deserve it," she said, with the ghost of a shadow of bitterness in her voice.

"A thousand thanks, my sister! I salute you!" And he kissed her. But she sighed, while he was radiant with happiness.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHICH IS, ON THE WHOLE, PERHAPS SLIGHTLY
DISCURSIVE.

MRS. BELLISHAM listened to Gervase Lane's story with scarcely concealed delight.

She was perfectly aware of the pain which Mary would suffer, but she considered that love for a penniless man was only a youthful disorder like the measles, and one that her daughter would speedily get over; she felt no insurmountable aversion to inflicting a little present pain for a great future good. What mother, the most affectionate in the world, has not stood over the child of her bosom with a cup of some nauseous compound, and laid down the stern doctrine,

“Take it—it will do you good” ? Or when has she hesitated at the dentist’s to indicate the awful chair of torture to her beloved offspring, with the not very consolatory statement that after the wrench would come comfort and freedom from pain ?

In this way Mrs. Bellisham insisted internally on Mary’s swallowing the bitter cup of separation, and submitting to the extraction of an irregular attachment. “It was all for her good”—a moral plaister which is of almost universal application, like Holloway’s Ointment, but not by any means as efficacious ; that is, of course, if we may believe the advertisements. They, as every well-directed mind must know, are not much less veracious than a good many other things one reads in the papers. “It is all for your good !” The phrase haunts one through life. It sounds in our youthful ears—with an accompaniment of “Swish ! swish !”—when the improvers of our young minds desire to convey an impression to it through

the cuticle. A hundred tongues din the same words at us every time we stumble or tumble, when we lose anything we particularly prize, or any one we ardently love. I am not for a moment doubting its truth, only one does not care to have it shouted at one at every turn. One gets tired of it, and very naturally. I have always thought that, whatever else in ancient history might be mythical, there was one passage that must be true—one incident that was no invention; and that was the anecdote told of Aristides—namely, that being asked by an unlettered Athenian to write the name of Aristides the Just on an oyster-shell, with a view to that patriot's ostracism, he asked why his countryman desired to exile him, and was told because he was tired to death of hearing him called "the Just." Oh, most worthy and unlettered clown—unlettered, and therefore unbiassed by the opinions of the cheap (or, for that matter, dear) press of Athens—I welcome thee to my heart as a man and a

brother, for thou art too thoroughly human to be the creature of fiction! Aristides is with me entirely, too—a proof that he did not obtain a reputation for wisdom and justice without cause, for he was so struck with the reasonableness of the objection that he at once abolished himself,—and very properly, too!

Let us return to Mrs. Bellisham, however, who, by the way, be pleased to understand, was by no manner of means an Aristides in petticoats. She would have insisted on Mary's breaking off the engagement with Gervase even if it had not all been for Mary's good, her particular aim and end in the matter being her own good. But as her road to that object happened to touch on Mary's benefit—as she believed—by the way, she was too shrewd not to take advantage of the fact both as a self-deluding comfort and an excuse to her daughter for her apparent severity.

She was a shrewd woman as well as a

worldly, and appreciated the strength of her position much too keenly to lose the slightest advantage it could offer. She even enlisted Gervase's honour against his happiness—"Mr. Lane must see that in the course she was compelled to pursue she was only seeking her daughter's welfare, which he professed (and she believed him) was his highest wish and dearest object." She did not desire to take any harsh measures, and would—against her maternal convictions, and to the risk of her daughter's true interests—even stretch a point in Mr. Lane's favour: she would not insist on an immediate termination of the engagement. She would allow any reasonable time—a year—a couple of years—(and "Mr. Lane would see how dear Mary's prospects in life were placed at stake by such a delay,") in the hopes of his achieving a position and prospects which would justify her consent to their marriage.

But Gervase was too much of a man of honour to accept these terms. It would

only have been postponing the evil day, he knew; and, what is more, he knew Mrs. Bellisham was aware of it too. He was not deceived by her plausibility. He felt that to take her at her word would be only to win a trifling present advantage in the brief respite, and to allow her at the expiration of the time of probation a still greater gain, for she could have taunted him with the injury to Mary's prospects which had resulted from her leniency and his selfishness. She should not outmanœuvre him in that way! He did not attempt to explain to her that two years were of no account in a man's struggle for position at the Bar. It might take him all that time to discover in what direction his best path lay, for it is only in novels that a young barrister (who after years of penury and obscurity usually gets a most important brief quite as accidentally as if he had picked it out of the gutter) can unite the practice of an attorney, a parliamentary barrister, a conveyancer, the

leader of a circuit, and the bright particular star of the Old Bailey. Attorneys who would give hundred guinea briefs to any young and unknown barrister that happened to return an umbrella they left behind them in an omnibus, or to stop the inevitable horse when running away with the accustomed daughter, are not plentiful ; or if they do exist, are not—and very properly, too—entrusted with affairs of much moment. The lawyer who, in return for a lost umbrella or a runaway daughter, would risk the interests of his client (who is nothing to daughter or umbrella, as they are nothing to him) is not fit to be permitted the conduct of a case as unimportant as the recovery of two shillings and threepence three-farthings in the County Court.

Gervase did not hope to meet with this phoenix of the legal profession, and did not therefore speculate on him as a possible contingency in the event of two years' extension of the engagement. It would be

waste of time, and worse than folly, to spend that period in going about on the look-out for forsaken gingham and bolting horses. So he declined Mrs. Bellisham's generous offer of two years, and told her he must submit to her decision without further protest, for he felt it was framed with a view to Mary's welfare, which was what he had most at heart.

As for poor Mary, she was unable to say a word. Her poor heart was torn in twain in the conflict between duty and affection. Hers was not a nature that could stand alone—it needed something to cling to. Gervase had not been slow to discover how plastic it was, and therefore in this time of trial he exerted the utmost self-restraint in order to avoid saying anything which might induce her to refuse obedience to her mother. He believed that a word from him might have turned the scale between love for him and love for her mother, but he would have bitten his tongue out rather than speak it.

He trusted that the affectionate nature which loved to cling closely around some beloved object would twine around the recollection of him, and keep his memory green in her heart.

Mrs. Bellisham was not so scrupulous. She made frequent appeals to Mary's love and faith, and did not hesitate to take advantage of Gervase's honourable admission that she had justice on her side, as an argument to Mary. Gervase groaned inwardly, but did not utter a single word of remonstrance. If conscience makes cowards of us all, it also makes heroes of some of us. It made a martyr of poor Gervase in this instance.

Mary submitted. The engagement was broken off. Gervase felt it was useless to linger any longer about the spot where his hopes had died and were buried. He had come down on the Saturday, you remember, and his interview with Mrs. Bellisham was on the Sunday. A wet Sunday—and a wet Sunday in the country, with the ceaseless

patter of the rain on the leaves ; with a dull grey sky, and a misty landscape, utterly unpeopled, all that could be dimly discerned through the rain-besprinkled pane, with the dull clank of the village church-bell—it was a fitting day for such a melancholy ceremony as the funeral of a living man's heart.

The next morning Gervase rose betimes, and set out for the station, for he had made up his mind to abridge his intended visit of a day or two, and return to town until it was time to start for his uncle's.

Mary was waiting to bid him goodbye. The parting was bitter—and the more bitter to Mary because she could not but feel that Gervase was cold. It was partly an assumed coldness in order to check his feelings, for he doubted his strength might fail at last, and his honourable resolutions break down. But it was also due, in some slight degree, to a natural feeling of pain at the seeming ease with which she had submitted to a decision of which, he appeared to forget, he himself

had urged the justice. It was also, perhaps, due somewhat to the shrinking of one who has just received a terrible wound, and who cannot bear even the tenderest and most loving hand to touch it.

Whatever it arose from, at all events it was there, and so plainly perceptible that it smote on poor Mary's heart like an ill omen. It could not—it could not be that he had ceased to love her, and was only too glad of this excuse to break off the engagement. She dismissed the thought—or rather strove hard to do so, but it would recur again and again. It came back to her mind after they had parted, when she thought that they had separated without exchanging a promise to remain plighted in heart and soul, despite the formal termination of their engagement. Gervase had purposely avoided such a step. He had thought over Bartlett's words—"You wouldn't ask her!"—and he had felt Bartlett was right. But Mary knew nothing of the reasons for his silence in this

respect. She had expected some such secret assurance of their abiding affection, and the lack of it filled her heart with vague terror and doubt.

They parted in silence with one long, lingering clasp of their hands, and then Gervase hurried on, arriving just in time to catch the train. He sought out an empty compartment, flung himself into a seat in the furthest corner, and buried his face in his hands. In silence and alone he went through his dark hour.

They tell us there is no romance in these days of steam! Is there not? In the next compartment to that in which Gervase sat were a young couple just starting on their honeymoon—a young lad going off to college for the first time, full of hope and the glorious sense of freedom—a widowed woman bound to London to see her only boy just returned from a long voyage—a poor man unexpectedly come into a large fortune—pshaw! how many varieties of joy—and for

that matter, how many shades of grief—might have been detected among the passengers by that train. No romance! Pshaw! it has taken its season-ticket, and travels up and down by rail as regularly as any of the million men of business with suburban villas and offices in town!

Gervase shut himself up in his chambers after his return to London until it was time to start for France. Bartlett did not know he was back—nor did any one, save Mrs. Gaffy, his laundress, upon whom he imposed silence, and who brought him his dinner of a day. Bad enough those dinners were—hard, dry chips of steak and burnt wizened chops, with half-cold potatoes that were clearly of Irish extraction, for they rejoiced in black eyes to a great extent—bad enough those dinners were to form an excuse for Gervase's want of appetite, but in reality they had no influence in the matter. The state of a man's stomach has so much to do with the state of his heart—and of his brain

too that it is only fair those organs should retort on it at times. It may seem to jar with one's notion of sentiment, but it is an undoubted fact that a disappointment in love causes as much disturbance of the digestive functions as an unripe apple or a surfeit of cucumber occasionally does.

It was only a sense of duty that roused him to make the necessary preparations for his trip to Normandy. He started at last, and the sea-voyage—what a blessed institution the sea is, and I say so with the fullest recognition of the existence of sea-sickness—what a blessed institution the sea is!—the sea-voyage did Gervase a vast deal of good; braced him up physically and mentally.

Meantime poor Mary drooped and pined terribly, to the great disgust of Mrs. Bellisham.

That worthy soul was quite enraged to think her daughter should be ill. It interfered with her thorough enjoyment of the

sense of freedom which the termination of the engagement with Gervase had given her. If any of my readers chanced some time since to order his agent in town to invest some money in the debentures of the London, Chatham, and Dover Railway, and has discovered within the last few days that, owing to pressure of business, his agent neglected to do so, and that the money is safe—he (or she) can fully appreciate Mrs. Bellisham's feelings when she learnt that she had a daughter whom she could invest with profit, instead of one pledged to a young man of limited means and doubtful expectations. It was not pleasant to have this sweet satisfaction disturbed by anxiety for Mary's health. At first she tried scolding, but that was not by any means the right remedy. That poor tendril of a heart of Mary's having been rudely torn away from the love to which it had clung, needed support and comfort rather than roughness and repulse.

She grew so weak and delicate that Mrs. Bellisham became really alarmed. Dr. Bradshaw, a clever physician, residing not far from St. Maud's Cray, was summoned without delay. He did not, as is usual in such cases—if we may believe what we read—at once perceive that Mary was suffering from the pangs of a metaphorical heart-breaking. He said she had an attack of nervous debility, and her system seemed to have suffered a shock of some sort—a cold, possibly. What she wanted, he added, was a tonic, and he should recommend her mother to take her to the seaside at once. Mrs. Bellisham wanted to know whether later in the year would not do. No, it wouldn't, the doctor said, for then all the watering-places would be crammed, and she wanted quiet—and, besides, she wanted sea-air at once. Asked whether Brighton would do; he said, decidedly not. Asked further, what place would do; he answered, after a little consideration, that he thought South-

stone-on-the-Sea, down in Beaveshire, was the very place.

So Mrs. Bellisham, not without an inward murmur, had to make up her mind to give up her fashionable watering-place for one year, and go off to quiet little Southstone. She consoled herself with the idea that this was, in fact, a stroke of economy. She was devoting a year to making her daughter marketable, and the time was, therefore, not altogether thrown away.

They took a pleasant little cottage on the Braxted Road, at the eastern extremity of Southstone. It stood on the brow of the cliffs, looking across the sea towards Higholm and Lowholm, a couple of rocky islets lying off the coast. It was a pleasant retreat enough, and the same briny air that blew the despondent cobwebs out of Gervase's brain, brought fresh colour to Mary's cheeks, and made her strong and well again, in spite of herself. The fact that men, and women too, have died, and

worms have eaten them, but not for love (alluding of course to the passion as the cause of the dying, not the devouring), is I believe, to a great extent, due to the invigorating presence of certain chemical agents—iodine and other things which I have not the science to define—in that invisible champagne, sea-air.

CHAPTER IX.

HOW JOANNA RELIEVED HER MIND.

WHY, Gervase, boy, what a fine lad you've grown!" said Mark Lane, as he welcomed his nephew to his house.

Mark and the Countess de Miancourt were to be married at Vieuxville, so the former had returned to his chateau to see that all was in readiness for the reception of his bride, while she had taken up her abode at the chief hotel of the town. Lieutenant René, of course, as her nearest friend, accompanied her thither, and watched over her—in the intervals of his billiard matches. He found that there were players at Vieuxville who were not afraid of his skill, and

he profited by their audacity. If he only knew half as much about fortifications, drill, and military tactics as he did about cannons, hazards, and splitting strokes, he must have been one of the most promising officers in the Austrian service, and clearly fated to become a marshal.

The Countess, though her brother neglected her, found plenty to interest and amuse her. She took endless pleasure in looking over the chateau and the grounds, and had, moreover, the joy of ordering her wedding outfit, and not paying for it. Mark, like a true gentleman, as soon as he learnt that the lady who was to be his wife stood in need of a little ready cash, placed a handsome sum at her disposal, and made her consent, as an especial act of favour, to order whatever she required for her marriage, and allow him to pay for it.

The Countess, though an adventuress, was a woman, and could not but be touched by this confiding generosity. She did not

mention it to her charming brother, for she knew well enough he would not have scrupled to avail himself of the *carte blanche* without limit. She shared the money Mark had given her with the insatiable young officer; but when he grumbled that she was too sparing of the Englishman's purse, she refused to draw more deeply on it until after marriage, and René was compelled to admit that until that event had taken place it was perhaps wise to be moderate. Whether he would have submitted as quietly if he had not just found a pigeon apt for plucking in the person of the son of the Vieuxville banker, it is impossible to say; but I fancy that the youngster, who had a great desire to shine as a *roué* and a man of the world, supplied the bold soldier for the nonce with all the funds he needed to keep up the supply of absinthe and cigars, which constituted his chief want; all his other requirements being paid for by his sister at the hotel.

The Countess was leaning on Mark Lane's arm as he stood on the steps of the chateau, waiting his nephew's arrival. She was a clever woman and a cool one, but she was just a little nervous as to what this nephew might turn out to be like. She was thoroughly acquainted with his history; for Mark had told it to her in his honest and straightforward way, speaking of his having brought the lad up as something that was a mere duty. But the Countess saw that it was more than this—saw, too, that the nephew would probably have looked on his succeeding to his uncle's property as a sort of right, and therefore conjectured that it was more than probable that he would be anything but friendly disposed to her.

As Gervase drove up the sweep in front of the chateau, therefore, he was eagerly scrutinised by his future aunt. The result of the scrutiny was satisfactory. Gervase was a handsome, frank-looking young Englishman, and she could read in his

face no shadow, however faint, of jealousy or disappointment.

"Why, Gervase, my boy, what a fine lad you've grown!" said Mark Lane, grasping his nephew warmly by the hand as he sprang from the dog-cart.

"Lad! Why, bless my soul, uncle Mark, you speak as if I were still in my teens. I wish I were!"

"Let me present you, Gervase, to my future wife and your aunt. Sounds awful, doesn't it? Your future aunt, the Countess de Miancourt. My love, this is my nephew, Gervase. You must like him for my sake."

"At once," said the Countess, flashing her fine eyes on Gervase; "but presently for his own, I can see. I salute you, Monsieur Gervase. Welcome!" and she held out her hand, sparkling with rings, with a graceful gesture, which had so much queenliness about it that Gervase, instead of shaking it, touched it respectfully with his lips.

"Any one would think he had got a touch of French refinement, eh?"

"Monsieur is gallant, as Englishmen always are," said the Countess, with another roll of the fine eyes.

At first she seemed to meditate a sort of discreet flirtation with Gervase. She might have carried it on under Mark's very nose without rousing his suspicions in the least; but Gervase did not give her the least encouragement, if he perceived her intention, which is not quite clear.

She and Mark conducted Gervase over the chateau and gardens. They pointed out a suite of apartments, charmingly furnished, which was intended for him.

"There, those rooms are yours, my boy. They will be ready for you at any time, whether we are here or no."

"Oh, it's very kind of you, uncle Mark."

"Oh, don't thank me. The idea was the Countess's. She chose the furniture and fittings, and she proposed that the suite

should be placed at your disposal at all times. You can run over here in vacation time, you know, and do just as you like. Do you fish?"

"Well—a little," said Gervase, with a troubled recollection of the trout at St. Maud's Cray.

"Humph! That means not at all, I fancy, my boy. A man is either an angler or not an angler. Fishing is like olives, either a passion or a horror. But you shoot, and there is capital sport to be had in the woods here."

"Do you preserve?" asked Gervase, who had never heard of his uncle's sporting propensities before.

"Not I. But our friends about Vieuxville are not the best of shots, and their firearms are not by any means 'arms of precision,' so that the wild things have it pretty much their own way."

"Well, I shall be most happy to do my best to support our reputation as a nation of

sportsmen ; but I have had very little practice of late."

"Why, you used to be always going for a little shooting somewhere or other, Gervase. Have you turned idler?"

"Well—no, not exactly! In fact, I may say the contrary. You see, a fellow has to study for the law, and—well, besides, after you've left College a year or two you lose sight of the chums who used to give you a little shooting now and then." Gervase blundered this out rather, for to have confessed the truth would have been to tell his uncle about Mary Bellisham. He had said nothing to him about his engagement before, because he fancied his uncle might have a settled dislike to love and marriage. Now it was useless to say anything about it, so he avoided the subject. But I rather fancy the Countess guessed the real state of the case, for she made some joking remarks about Cupid, and shooting, and hearts, and darts, at which Gervase smiled grimly, and which,

as it was couched in the neatest French, Mark did not quite comprehend—but he laughed all the same.

“Well, what do you think of the old place?” asked Mark, when they had finished the tour of the chateau and grounds.

“A very jolly old place indeed,” said Gervase; “I was rather afraid of it in the old days when I came over from school to spend my holidays here. I used to fancy it was full of subterranean passages and ghosts, and I never liked to walk in the grounds for fear of wolves. But I like it immensely now.”

“Well, you see, it has been considerably furbished up since those days. It was rather a gloomy place then, for it was just as it was left by the last owner, who was one of Napoleon’s generals, I believe, and went into exile with his Emperor. As for the wolf part of the story, I dare say you had heard of wolves being shot about here; they have been within my recollection in

sharp winters. However, we'll hope they have vanished with the fusty old furniture. Both were charming properties for an old feudal castle; but we have changed all that now."

Gossiping in this way, the three returned to the lawn in front, where they met René, who was duly introduced to Gervase.

The sous-lieutenant made himself very agreeable to Gervase, and appeared charmed to make his acquaintance. He offered him a cigar, and volunteered his services to show him all the lions of Vieuxville. "They were not many—his faith! for he had been able to make acquaintance with them all in a couple of days."

Gervase accepted the offer of the cigar, and professed his readiness to visit the lions at the earliest opportunity, when he should be grateful for René's escort.

"*Sapristi*, I am grateful for your arrival, monsieur," said the young Frenchman, when they had dropped a little behind the other

two in order to light their cigars with that thoroughly German compound, German tinder, which is so phlegmatic of disposition that it takes two minutes to convince itself it is alight. “*Sapristi*, monsieur, I am glad of your arrival. It is *triste* to be a third party with two such turtle-doves, and in such a town. One has nothing to do but smoke and play billiards. I have become quite a skilful player, I have had so much practice—I, who was the laughingstock of my comrades for my bad play. Do you play at all?”

“A little—very little. I haven’t touched a cue for an age,” said Gervase.

“We shall be pretty fairly matched, I dare say,” said the *sous officier*, “and it will be a relief to play with a gentleman. They are such *canaille*, these Vieuxvillers. But hark! that is the summons to dinner.”

After dinner, René very considerably hinted to Gervase that perhaps “the young people” would be glad of a *tête-à-tête*, and

proposed a game at billiards. So they adjourned to the billiard-room.

Gervase spoke the truth when he said he had not touched a cue for a long time, but he was a very good player. He had learnt the game at Oxford during an idle term just after he had passed "smalls." His especial crony had been rusticated for some vagaries he had been guilty of after a bump-supper; but not wishing to go home and distress his parents, he had retired to the quiet little village of Cowley. He had not been there a week before he found the village so very quiet that he was driven into Oxford every day in search of amusement. Of course, he did not dare show himself; so the only recreation he could indulge in was billiards. He used to spend his days in the rooms of one Bickeriss, and Gervase used to give a good deal of his time to playing with him as an act of charity. His friend was an excellent player, and took great trouble to teach Gervase, finding it no fun to give him

fifty and beat him in one break by forty-nine. So in time Gervase became a crack player ; and therefore though a little out of practice now, he was not long in warming to his work, and he gave the lieutenant some trouble ; and before the evening was over had turned the tables on him, and beaten him three games out of four. This would not have happened with René's ordinary play, for he had a smart knack of "correcting fortune," but found, on attempting to cheat, that Gervase was rather too sharp for him. Gervase had been in the habit of playing at Oxford with a man belonging to his own college—one Moyer, or, as he was called at St.Brandred's, "Monkey Moyer," an artful gentleman, who realised a pleasant little income by bets, card-sharping, and billiards, but who found a match in Gervase. Accustomed to watching the "Monkey," Gervase was not slow to detect René's attempts to swindle, and did not scruple to check them at once.

“Confound these foreigners—what born cheats they are! Here is an officer and a gentleman actually not ashamed to try a little billiard-sharpping!” thought Gervase; but he did not regard the matter in a very serious light. As for the lieutenant, finding he was not making money, and caring nothing for billiards as a game, merely, he soon wearied of playing, and vowed internally never to challenge Gervase again. They returned to the drawing-room; and before long René declared it time to escort his sister home; for the wedding was to take place next day, and they must be up and astir betimes.

Gervase and his uncle did not sit up long after the guests were gone. Mark Lane only waited to ask his nephew’s opinion of the Countess; and as it was favourable—though, as Gervase said very truly, he had not seen much of her—he bade him good-night, and went to bed.

Gervase sought his own apartments. They

lay in one wing of the chateau, at some distance from those of his uncle. The place was strange, and the journey and the new faces had excited him, and he could not sleep. He was restless, he knew not why, and had a vague presentiment that something strange was about to happen.

He flung himself down on the sofa in his dressing-room, and lit a cigar.

He had hardly taken half a dozen whiffs, when there came a knock at the door.

"Come in," said Gervase, surprised at having a visitor at so late an hour.

The door opened, and his uncle's housekeeper, an Englishwoman, entered.

"Why, Joanna, what on earth are you sitting up so late for? You'll have a tiring day of it to-morrow."

"Don't talk of to-morrow, sir. I hate the very idea of it; and it's about that I have come to speak to you, sir."

Joanna was one of those rare creatures now-a-days—a good and faithful servant.

She had been a servant of Mark's mother, with whom she "took her first place," as under-housemaid, at sixteen years of age, and whose service she never quitted. She had nursed Mark as a boy through a severe fever, and had become much attached to him. On his mother's death, she became his housekeeper; and when he left England, she overcame all her prejudices to the sea and foreigners, and accompanied him into exile. She had been almost a mother to him—she was between five and eight years his senior—when he was suffering under the disappointment which drove him from his native land. She had been very kind to Gervase when he spent his holidays with his uncle; and she was altogether like one of the family rather than a servant.

"What do you think of the Countess, Master Gervase?" said Joanna, seating herself on a chair by the door. She called him "Master Gervase" from habit. Old and faithful servants somehow seem so

much attached to us in our youthful days, they will never acknowledge that we grow up.

"What do I think of the Countess, Joanna? Well, I've seen very little of her; but she's pretty, and she and my uncle seem very fond of each other."

"Oh!" said Joanna.

Now "oh!" is a simple enough word in its way to look at, but it may mean a great many different things, according to the manner in which it is pronounced. We may enumerate, for instance, the "oh!" exclamatory nervous, the "oh!" exclamatory remonstrant, the "oh!" deliberative doubtful, the "oh!" dissentient indifferent, the "oh!" interrogative adumbrant.

Joanna's "oh!" in this instance belonged to the last class. It was the essence of a long sentence doubly distilled into one drop. It said as plainly as "oh!" could speak, "You think so, do you? Well, now, if I chose, I could

tell you something you little fancy about it."

Gervase apprehended the "oh!" in its fullest sense.

"Come, Joanna, you have something to tell me: speak out. We have known each other too long, and I know your attachment and fidelity to my uncle too well, for us to have any shyness about the matter. Say what you wish."

"Well then, Master Gervase, I wish that woman had never set her foot in the place. There's no good to come of it, mark my words."

"How so? What are your reasons?"

"Why, then, if you ask for my reasons, I've got none to show; but I'm sure, from my feelings, that there's something wrong;—and then that great hulking fellow of a brother lounging about with nothing to do. It's my opinion he is either no soldier at all, or he's been turned out of the army. John the coachman says he doesn't think

he's a soldier, for John was in the Yeomanry in our old Downbury days, and he says this lieutenant, as he calls himself, don't seem to know much about the drill."

"Not English drill, probably. These foreigners have a different system altogether. And as for his being a soldier, in many countries, Joanna, every man is obliged to serve his time in the army," said Gervase in explanation.

"Well, soldier or no soldier, he's an idle ne'er-do-well, with his billiards and smoking, and bad language. I don't see why master should marry the whole family."

"I suppose he'll rejoin his regiment when the wedding is over."

"Rejoin his fiddlestick, Master Gervase. Why I heard him talking with his sister about where his rooms were to be—he wanted yours—these very apartments, sir, if you'll believe me—like his impudence! But she wanted him nearer her, so he is to have the suite over the billiard-room."

"Humph! Does my uncle know that? He said nothing about it to me."

"Lor', he's a downright fool about that woman, and he'll let her do what she likes. There's no asking him anything of the sort, either; for if you do, it's only 'Ask Madame, the Countess' — confound Madame, the Countess, begging your pardon, Master Gervase," said Joanna, dropping a curtsey as an apology for her language.

"I think you're a little jealous of the new authority, do you know, Joanna."

"Not a bit, sir;—bless you, I've wished he'd marry often and often, poor dear, for he's been bad treated, and deserves better. But I can't bear foreigners—and she's the worst foreigner I ever met with—such outlandish goings-on. And as for a Countess, I don't believe she's a Countess, a bit more than I am."

"It doesn't much matter if she isn't; anybody can be a Count almost here."

"Oh, Master Gervase, I do wish you saw

it as I do. If you did, you'd stop it, I am sure."

"Why, bless my soul, Joanna—the wedding is to take place to-morrow, and I couldn't stop it if I wished ever so."

"That's true, I suppose. You'll pardon my coming, Master Gervase, but I did so want to relieve my mind. Good-night, sir."

"Good-night, Joanna. Don't say a word about it. I'm glad to have had a chat with you, and hope your fears only rise from too great anxiety about my uncle's happiness."

Joanna retired, and Gervase, who was beginning to grow drowsy, went to bed.

"But I'll be hanged if I don't feel as if there were something in what she said," was his last reflection, as he turned over on his pillow.

CHAPTER X.

DOINGS AT SOUTHSTONE-ON-THE-SEA.

MRS. BELLISHAM had spent too much of her time at watering-places not to have a taste for gossip and scandal. Of course it was all "innocent curiosity," of course she "hated people who did nothing but talk of their neighbours in a malicious way." But she loved tittle-tattle and back-biting none the less. It is a profound truth that some people

Compound for sins they are inclined to,
By damning those they have no mind to ;

but it is no less a fact that a good many condemn, with the loudest voice, their own

pet wickedness. The expedient is not a very novel one, nor is it a very ingenious one, but it answers its purpose admirably. A thief very often escapes capture by taking up the cry of his pursuers, and shouting "Stop thief!" lustily. Simple folks seeing him run by, vociferating, with a great-coat and an ormolu cloak under his arm, imagine that he has recaptured some of the robber's booty, and is actively endeavouring to seize the robber himself. In the same way, if you only preface your remarks by declaring your horror of scandal, and your disbelief in rumours, you may take away anybody's character with impunity.

I have heard from a friend who passes everywhere for the best of beings—a man seethed in the milk of human kindness till he is all tenderness—two scandalous stories about two other friends, which I should never have heard a word about from anybody else. "Ah, very sad, very sad," he says, with a grave shake of the head at

somebody's name. "Why? what?" you ask. "What! haven't you heard? Dear me, I thought you knew all about it, or I wouldn't have alluded to it. Very sad!" You naturally wish to learn more, and then he tells you that there is strong ground for believing that Jones poisoned his mother-in-law, or that Robinson is a forger, and has three wives living. "Very sad; but of course it may not be true. I never believe these things, myself!" says our tender-hearted friend; and then, having thus sown the seeds of a vile slander, he goes away smiling to lead a tipsy orange-woman over a crossing, or to sit for half an hour in the cab, in which he is going home, because the horse has its nosebag on, and he wouldn't disturb the poor thing at his meals for worlds!

Mrs. Bellisham did not carry her humbug quite so far as this, but she was always sternly virtuous in denouncing scandal, and invariably ready to listen to it. At South-

stone she formed the acquaintance of Miss Blink, who resided not far from Mrs. Bellisham's cottage, in a villa which was known as The Bungalow. Miss Blink was of Eastern extraction, as her very black hair and eyes, her brown skin, and her temper amply proved.

According to her own report, she was the daughter of General Blink, a distinguished officer of the East India Company, and an Indian Princess whom he had married under most romantic circumstances. People who did not love Miss Blink—and their name was legion—gave another version of her parentage: they declared her father was a non-commissioned officer who had looted to some purpose, and that her mother was about as much a Princess as she was his wife. Miss Blink called on Mrs. Bellisham soon after her arrival, and, starting from India as a common point of interest, they became warm friends in a short time. Miss Blink, as a rule, became the warm friend, in

—and mostly for—a short time, of all new residents.

Mrs. Bellisham was only too delighted to form an acquaintance so valuable, for Miss Blink combined in her own person all the charms and advantages of a Local Directory, Court Guide, and Peerage and Baronetage; not to mention the additional interest of a Register of Events, Gazette of Bankruptcy, and minute Chronicle of Misfortunes, Misdemeanours, Misalliances, Malignity, and Mendacity. Before she had been at Southstone a week, Mrs. Bellisham was thoroughly posted up in all possible particulars concerning the inhabitants of that pleasant watering-place.

Miss Blink was pretty well acquainted with the antecedents of the majority of the visitors to Southstone as well as of the inhabitants, but of course in some instances even her sagacity and research were at fault. She candidly confessed to Mrs. Bellisham that she was at fault about a

certain Sir Charles Lewis, who had taken a villa on the hill behind Southstone. He was a baronet and one of the Welsh Lewises, but beyond that she was unable to discover anything about him. He had plenty of money, and lived in good style, but he was very retired, and avoided everybody, having given out on his arrival, through the agent of whom he took the villa, that he did not intend to receive visitors, and that therefore he hoped no one would call on him. Most people took the hint, and left him alone. The few who did call got nothing by leaving their cards on him, for he took no notice of them.

Miss Blink, as a last resource, had actually bribed one of Sir Charles's servants. It cost her a struggle, for, though she was tolerably well off, she was as mean as possible. She never in all her life gave a servant a shilling (except as wages) for any service, but she had on occasion bought information. In this instance, however, her

money was wasted. The man promised to tell her all he knew about his master for five shillings; but having pocketed the coin, said, with a broad grin, that all he knew was just nothing, for he had been engaged with the house. Sir Charles had gone to the agent, paid him very handsomely for his services, and had commissioned him to engage servants and furnish the villa for him.

The agent was a Mr. Cadgeby, the lawyer, auctioneer, architect, churchwarden, turnpike trustee, and harbour commissioner of Southstone, a small dignitary in his way, but not a very wealthy man in spite of his many callings. Miss Blink had not spared him in her gossip, and he owed her one, and she knew it; but her curiosity was greater than her prudence, and when she found he was the only person in all Southstone who knew anything about Sir Charles Lewis, she was determined to go and ask him.

Mr. Cadgeby received her stiffly enough at first, but when he saw her drift he grew more courteous, and at last seemed so gracious that she asked him without hesitation to tell her all he knew about the recent comer.

As soon as he had her fairly in the trap, he froze up. "So, Miss Blink, you come here to worm my professional confidence out of me. Of course you would not betray that!—you never do—never talk scandal, oh, no! But you see, unfortunately, I can't tell you what is no secret of mine. Any secret of my own you would be quite welcome to—quite, if you will but name the particular one. But in this instance I can only tell you what you know already—Sir Charles has taken a house, furnished it handsomely, lives in good style, is very wealthy, and is, besides, what no doubt is the cause of your inquiries, unmarried!"

"Sir!" said Miss Blink, with indignation.

“Ha! ha! ha! Found you out, eh? Miss B. What will Southstone say when it hears that you, who, we all said, would never marry—because you hated our sex, that is, of course!—that *you* should be smitten and driven contrary to your usual practice (because, we know, you hate scandal and impertinent curiosity) to inquire into the history of a handsome, a wealthy, and I may add, an interesting young baronet. Dear me! Dear me! Who would have thought it? and what will Southstone say and do when it hears it—as it shall do?” said Mr. Cadgeby, opening the door and shouting his last words after Miss Blink, who had retired before his attack, utterly routed and discomfited—“as it shall do as soon as I’ve finished looking over this deed.”

Mrs. Blink fled to Mrs. Bellisham, and related her interview to her.

“The rude, low creature! And he’ll go and talk about it all over the town, and I

shall have all kinds of horrid things said to me, and all kinds of sneers to put up with. But there, what can you expect of a vulgar wretch like that, an ill-bred person, whose mother used to sell butter in the Braxted market, and was married—if ever she was married—to his father when he was so drunk at the fair that he could hardly sit on his horse.”

Mrs. Bellisham did not attempt to soothe her friend's agitated feelings. She was too much occupied in thinking over her last words.

“He was wealthy and unmarried!”

Here was the opportunity she had so long been seeking. A baronet, young, rich, and a bachelor—and Mary free! And then there was no society at Southstone at this time of the year, so that the field was clear.

As for his retired mode of living, he had probably adopted it because there were no people in Southstone with whom he could associate. She was not surprised at his

keeping aloof, and believed that she should have no difficulty in overcoming his shyness. She determined to open the siege without delay.

She had observed that Sir Charles generally took a stroll along the shore about sundown, and she determined to take Mary for a walk there that very evening, and endeavour to strike up an acquaintance with him. Of the exact way in which that was to be done she did not trouble herself to think. Chance or a woman's wit will effect what the best-contrived schemes will fail to do, and she was content to leave all to the inspiration of the moment.

Mary had no idea of her mother's intention when she received orders to put on her things for a walk by the sea. She obeyed at once, and before long mother and daughter were equipped, and set out for the beach.

It was a pleasant evening, and the sun was setting in great magnificence. The tide had turned, and a brisk breeze was blowing

off the land, capping the billows with crests of white foam.

The receding waves had left a margin of hard, gleaming, moist sand, which was more pleasant to walk on than the dry sand above water-mark, into which you sank ankle-deep at every step. There were not many people abroad on this evening, but the few who were out had, with one consent, adopted the strip of wet shore for their promenade.

Mrs. Bellisham saw that the baronet had not missed his accustomed walk. He was strolling quietly towards them, followed by his Newfoundland dog, the only companion of his rambles. He appeared to be lost in thought, picking up strips of seaweed on the point of his stick, and flinging them into the water as he sauntered along. The action suggested an idea to Mrs. Bellisham. She noticed that if he threw the broad fronds of seaweed into the air the wind was quite strong enough to carry them into the sea.

Just as she and Mary were close upon

Sir Charles, she picked up a shell, and took out her handkerchief as if to wipe it, when the wind apparently snatched the fluttering cambric out of her grasp and carried it into the sea. Mrs. Bellisham gave a little shriek, and cried, "Oh, my best handkerchief!" and she and Mary both made a dart to recover it, but a receding wave had carried it beyond their reach. Mary tried to fish it out with her parasol-handle, but failed to recover it.

Under these circumstances, if Sir Charles Lewis had been a sworn woman-hater he could hardly have refused his aid.

"Permit me," he said; and wading into the sea about ankle deep, he captured the drifting cambric with the hook of his walking-stick. He had not noticed from whose hands it had been blown, and supposed, from seeing her endeavouring to reach it, that it was Mary's. He therefore offered it to her, and she had to explain, in passing it to her mother, whose it was.

"It is not mine, it is mamma's; but I am much obliged to you all the same."

"I am so much indebted to you. I value the handkerchief much, as it is my Mary's embroidery," chimed in Mrs. Bellisham; though, considering that it was Mary's task to embroider handkerchiefs or anything else for her mother, there was no reason why this one should have been particularly prized.

Sir Charles declared that he was only too happy to be of service, and said it was no trouble.

Mrs. Bellisham was so sorry he had got wet. Was he not afraid of cold?

Sir Charles was not afraid of cold. Salt water, he believed, was not likely to give one cold.

Mrs. Bellisham was not so sure of that, and was very nervous about wet feet. She hoped he would go home at once and procure a change. She was sorry her carelessness had abridged his walk.

Sir Charles could not think of returning

home for such a trifle. He often got worse wettings without any evil consequences. So far from Mrs. Bellisham's abridging his walk, he hoped she would prolong it by allowing him the honour of turning back with them.

Mrs. Bellisham would be only too much honoured.

So the three strolled along together.

Mrs. Bellisham observed with delight that Sir Charles had scarcely taken his eyes off Mary from the moment they met. A glow of satisfaction thrilled through her motherly bosom, and she felt that such a triumph was worth the spoiling of a gross of best pocket-handkerchiefs.

Sir Charles made himself extremely agreeable. He had the good taste not to alarm Mary by paying her especial attention; but Mrs. Bellisham could see that he was watching her daughter, and that all his attempts to amuse were aimed at her. He was a gentleman, and a man of refinement

and education, and therefore possessed considerable powers of pleasing when he chose to exert them.

Mary could not help being charmed by his conversation. He reminded her of Gervase, who had taught her a taste for intellectual conversation in preference to small-talk. There was nothing pointed in his attentions to alarm her, and she was of so frank a nature that she could not help showing that he pleased her. It had been very dull at Southstone, and this new acquaintance was like a little bit of sunshine.

They strolled along the coast eastward as far as the light house before they thought of returning; so that by the time they reached the steps that led up from the beach to the Braxted road, the stars were glimmering faintly, and the pale crescent of the moon was rising, while the revolving light on the Lowholm was gleaming intermittently over the grey waste of waters.

Sir Charles saw the ladies to their door,

where he bade them good evening, declaring, when they thanked him for his escort, that the obligation was on his side, whereon there was a courteous dispute, which made them all so good-humoured, and put them on such a friendly footing, that he summoned heart of grace to ask if he might be permitted to call next day.

You may rest assured that Mrs. Bellisham did not decline the proffered visit.

CHAPTER XI.

THE WEDDING AT VIEUXVILLE.

THE wedding of Mark Lane and the Countess de Miancourt was celebrated with much outward rejoicing. A long residence in France had not destroyed the nationality of the bridegroom—had, in fact, rather intensified it—so he determined that everything should be conducted in truly British style. Accordingly the grounds of the chateau were thrown open, and there was a huge marquee on the lawn, in which there was a banquet à l'Anglaise. An ox was roasted whole, very much to its disgust as a well-regulated article of consumption, to judge from the expression of its

intelligent features as it revolved on the gigantic spit. You could read on its countenance, as clearly as if it had been the page of a book, a remonstrance against such a barbaric method of "cooking."

There is a story that a certain ship was wrecked on a barren and inhospitable island, and that, after a few days of almost starvation, the crew determined to cast lots which of them should be eaten. The lot fell upon a French *cordons bleu*, who was going out as *chef de cuisine* to an English ambassador somewhere. He fell on his knees before his companions in distress, and made a long and vehement oration in his native tongue. The sailors were disgusted to think he was pleading for his life; but a passenger translating the poor fellow's remarks, it came out that all his anxiety was that he should be cooked in a decent way, and he was beseeching permission to arrange himself as a pleasant little dinner before being killed. His prayer was granted, and he accordingly,

with the aid of some stores from the ship, which the Englishmen had deemed useless, and some of the herbs he picked on the island, prepared himself prospectively in about six courses. He showed the cook of the vessel how he was to dress the various joints that would shortly be at his disposal, and drew up a seductive *menu*, with such items as "*Filet de chef aux fines herbes*," "*Cordon bleu sauté en huile*," "*Côtelettes de Français à la Soubise*," with a few elegant side-dishes, "*quos enumerare*," &c. Of course this style of feast was not to be sketched out in five minutes. It took time; and before it was quite completed, a sail hove in sight, saw the wreck, and stood in to take off the survivors. Will it be believed that the Frenchman was absolutely disappointed to think that he was not going to be cooked? He was with difficulty persuaded to leave his preparations and enter the boat; and it was believed that if anybody had given him the least encouragement, by stopping on the

island for dinner, he would have killed and cooked himself rather than such a *recherché* little spread should be lost.

Our friend the ox on the lawn had evidently the same enthusiasm for the French style of cookery. He said, as plain as roast beef could speak, "Why do me in this savage fashion? I'm burnt and smoked outside, and raw in the middle. Why did you not inter me in about a hundred and five delightful and varied dishes—serve me up with honour from the tip of my tongue (with piquant sauce) to the last joint of my tail (in soup)?"

It would have been wiser, for the animal was wasted. The Vieuxvillers walked round it as it frizzled, and regarded it with wondering eyes; but as for eating any of it, such an idea never entered their heads. "*Tiens, c'est drôle!*" was their commentary.

They appreciated more clearly the staving-in of some casks of wine and brandy, but they did not carry their appreciation to

excess even in this particular. There was not a single instance of that glorious and enthusiastic intoxication with which a similar gathering in England would have done honour to the founder of the feast.

As for the athletic sports, they were growing familiar to these worthy people, and there was therefore a fair number of entries for the jumping in sacks, the greasy pole, and the pig with a soapy tail.

There were fireworks, too, in the evening, and a general illumination of the park with those bright-coloured little lamps which in England have been almost superseded, for such purposes, by gas—an infinitely inferior substitute.

Gervase was master of the ceremonies, and an arduous duty he had to perform. He was on his legs all day superintending this, conducting that, directing t'other; so that when violin, pipe, and tabor made themselves audible in the evening, and the marquee was cleared for a dance, he would

have given worlds for a chance of slipping away to bed. Instead of which, however, he had to take the floor with a buxom lass, who footed it so perseveringly in her short petticoat and high white cap, that he lost consciousness of everything mundane save the fact that he was a pair of feet bound by an inflexible necessity to toe and heel, shuffle, cover the buckle, stamp, pirouette, and generally keep moving in time to one of the swiftest airs that horsehair ever evoked from catgut.

Lieutenant René supported the young Englishman with great spirit, and the merrimaking was pronounced on all sides to be a genuine success.

The happy couple set out for Paris, where they were to spend their honeymoon, and Gervase remained in command at the chateau. His uncle had begged of him to remain there in charge until his return; and the young fellow felt it would be ungracious to refuse, though he wished to

return to London, and endeavour to drown his cares in study and business.

He was not at all sorry when, about a week after the departure of the happy pair, the *sous-lieutenant* was summoned to Paris on business. The more he saw of that gallant officer, the less he liked him, and the more suspicious he grew about him; and this frame of mind was an unpleasant one, for he could not help thinking—and reproaching himself for it—that his dislike might have arisen from selfish motives and disappointment.

The reason of the lieutenant's summons to Paris was this: His sister had just discovered, to her horror—"for did it not look as if she had deceived '*Ce bon Marc, son mari bien aimé?*'"—that her pension expired on her marrying again.

Mark, of course, told her that he had not married her for her money—as she might have been aware, one would be led to think, when one remembers that it was

the fact of her being short of means that led to Mark's proposing to her. Oddly enough, this did not seem to strike her at all, and she talked as if her pension was a colossal fortune, compared with which her husband's really handsome income sank into insignificance. She was *désolée*; she was all sorts of terrible things about it; she would appeal to the law; she would carry her case to the foot of the throne; and she would do any other twenty startling things. Mark did not wish to cross her, and yet did not care to have his name paraded in the matter; so he asked her to send for her brother—which was exactly what this most artful of women had intended all along.

Réné was accordingly summoned to Paris, whither he repaired with the greatest alacrity; for, sooth to say, having for the nonce completely cleared out the young banker, there were no more pigeons in Vieuxville to interest this distinguished member of the Philoperisteron Society.

Mark took the young officer into his confidence.

"It isn't of the slightest consequence about this pension, you know, René. It doesn't make a grain of difference to me, but your sister seems so distressed about it that we must do something to set her mind at rest. Now what I am most anxious to avoid is any publicity in the matter. I don't like the idea of dunning your Government about a trifle of this sort. We should make a terrible noise in England if any foreigner tried to screw a pension out of us under similar circumstances. So you will take care that all is done quietly? We can satisfy my wife's scruples, and then drop the affair."

Lieutenant René addressed Mark as "always generous Englishman," and told him that he believed he could conduct the matter with all the secrecy he desired. He, however, rather took his sister's view of the case, and protested that the nation was

bound in honour to continue an allowance which had been his sister's when monsieur asked her to become his. "La belle France should not be niggardly of dowry to her daughters when they marry noble Englishmen."

So this devoted brother set to work and made strides in the case. He brought several lawyers of great eminence to Mark, and even managed an interview with a high official; and both lawyers and official had to be feed handsomely. Mark found that, having elected to promote his suit by the back-stairs, he would be under the necessity of carpeting those stairs with Napoleons.

Presently he hinted to René that he thought they had carried the case far enough to satisfy his wife's mind, and it would be well to drop.

"*Que voulez-vous ?*" said the sous-lieutenant, shrugging his shoulders. "They had found, these lawyers here, that there was a legal claim on his sister's part, and he did

not doubt her obtaining a restoration of the pension."

"Which I had rather not have," said Mark.

"What is to be done? Justice must take its course," the lieutenant explained.

"Hang justice!" said Mark. "I don't want the money, and won't have it."

Whereupon this devoted and affectionate brother said, if he (Mark) did not care to have it, he (Réné) would be self-sacrificing and relieve him of the burden of it; but Mark did not see it. He insisted on the dropping of the suit.

The upshot was that Mark, having paid a rather large sum to set the machinery at work, had to disburse an almost equal amount in order to stop it, which, thanks to the energy and untiring zeal of his brother-in-law, he ultimately contrived to do. Of course I need not tell my readers this was a quiet conspiracy on the part of Lieutenant Réné and a few acute friends.

The lawyers and the high officials at Court were mere sharpers of René's acquaintance. They entered into the little scheme with the greatest spirit, out of pure regard for their friend and for a share of the profits, which, altogether, were considerable. René of course got the lion's share;—first of all he bargained for it with his companions, and in the second place there was no necessity for his revealing to them the full extent to which Mark had bled. So René was in high feather—he had made an unexpected *coup*, and what is more, had outwitted his accomplices.

He had been summoned to Paris, because his loving sister wished to have him near her, and had therefore invented the pension story. But when he came, Mark's wish to carry on the affair quietly suggested the idea of turning the Englishman's folly to account, and it was put into action, with what result we know.

I am not sure that this did not serve

Mark right. He had no business, as an English gentleman, to lend himself to any back-stairs diplomacy and pettifogging. He touched pitch, and I am neither surprised nor grieved particularly that some of it stuck to his fingers and burnt them.

In the meantime Gervase remained alone in the old chateau at Vieuxville, where he had no one to talk to save Joanna. The old woman talked so incessantly about the Countess and her brother, and repeated so many suspicious stories about them, that Gervase could not help being somewhat influenced, and determined to keep his eye on both brother and sister; but he had not the opportunity, for the Countess prevailed on Mark to prolong his stay in Paris, and Gervase, at his uncle's reiterated request, remained month after month at the chateau, until at last he was compelled to write and say that it had become absolutely imperative for him to return to London and look after his professional interests.

CHAPTER XII.

WHEREIN MOLEWARP PROSECUTES HIS SEARCH.

MRS. GAFFY was stooping down to unlock the "oak" of Gervase Lane's chambers, when she felt a hand on her shoulder. She was not a believer in Spiritualism—except in the form of "hot with"—or she would have taken it for granted that the touch was a supernatural one. As it was, not having heard a footstep, or a sound of any sort to announce that any one was coming upstairs, her first impulse was to gasp out "Murder! Thieves!"

"No, my dear," said a voice behind her; "neither. It's police."

Mrs. Gaffy turned and beheld Molewarp.

“Law, Moley, how you did startle me!”

Moley smiled a self-satisfied smile. He delighted in startling people—lived for nothing else, in fact.

“Did I?” he asked. “Then you ought to be ashamed of yourself. What would the departed G. say to you, who was an active and intelligent officer, only he had not a logical mind?” and Molewarp gently tapped his forehead with one finger, as if to indicate that *the* logical mind *par excellence* was there. He was a little vain, was Molewarp, and not unnaturally so. He was the best-known officer in the detective force, and he was famous for the certainty with which he traced out a crime. “As safe as Moley,” was a phrase in use not only at the police station, but in lower stations in life—among the thieves, and costers, and roughs generally. The contest between the dishonest classes and the police is conducted just like a game at skill;—of course at times some violent rascal will lose his temper and pitch

into an adversary, but the regular players take it coolly, and when they find the policeman has five or six trumps, will generally throw up their hands, and give in like reasonable people.

Perhaps I need hardly go so far as the gaming-table for a simile. The contest between the rogue and the man, who is set to catch a thief, is conducted just like an ordinary commercial transaction—is a sort of stock-broking, in fact, wherein each tries to outwit the other, and the one who is worsted submits to the swindle, entertaining no feeling towards his conqueror save perhaps a subdued admiration for his superior 'cuteness.

On this account, Molewarp, who always managed to hold good hands, with plenty of honours—who never failed in his speculations—had quite as high a reputation in thieftom as at Scotland Yard. The cunning of the thief is of a practical and limited character—he wants intellect, and so Mole-

warp's reputation for sagacity stood him in good stead. Many an ill-doer who might possibly have had some chance of eluding justice, would give himself up when he heard that Molewarp was after him. "Don't shoot, colonel, I'll come down," said the immemorial coon. "Oh! it's you, Mr. Molewarp, sir! Well, then, it's no use for to go for to deny it. Me and Conkey Jim was in it," the white-faced prig would say, and hold out his wrists passively for the handcuffs.

But the mention of handcuffs reminds me that we have left Mrs. Gaffy in custody for some space.

That worthy woman was the relict of a member of the police force. Gaffy 192 J, was, as Molewarp said, an active and intelligent officer. I am bound to say that his activity was greater than his intelligence—as I fancy not unusually happens in the case of the police—for he rashly ventured one fine St. Patrick's morning down Sligo Court,

in the neighbourhood of Ratcliff Highway, when the Irish inhabitants of that highly-perfumed and densely-peopled alley were in the full enjoyment of a "free fight." Such an uninvited intrusion was foolish to a degree, for on such an occasion brickbats are liberally bandied about, which appear to have only the effect of stimulating the Irish brain by a brisk outward application, but have an unfortunate tendency to break English heads. A brickbat or a shillelah, or some such mild stimulant, was applied outwardly to poor Gaffy's skull; and so his brains were knocked out, the verdict at the station-house being that they could not have been of much use to him or he would never have gone down the court on St. Patrick's Day. However, use or no use, they were knocked out in the days mentioned by the bard as the time when, a man's brains being out, the man would die; so Gaffy retired from the force, and was buried.

I mention this in order to explain the

familiar way in which Mrs. G. addressed the detective.

“And what may you want here, Moley? There’s nothing wrong on *my* staircase, and my gentlemen is all gentlemen.”

“Oh, of course, mum. But you’ve a party called Lewis up in your attics. I saw a parcel directed “— Lewis, Esq.,” in the lodge. What’s his Christian name, do you happen to know?”

“’Enery,” said Mrs. G. promptly.

“Then I don’t want *him*,” said Molewarp.

“I should think not, indeed, and him quite the gentleman, with the loveliest linen, as only lives in chambers for convenency, being a fortune by birth, and which law is not his profession, though in the Temple.”

“Well, my dear,” said Molewarp, cocking his hat pleasantly over one eye, and winking, “it is a gentleman I want—at least a chap as passes himself off for such. And I’ll have him yet, by Jove!” And Molewarp scowled.

"Dear me, what is it—big'my, or forgery, or what?" asked Mrs. Gaffy, who, beside her natural feminine curiosity, felt herself related to the police by marriage, and took a deep interest in their affairs.

"Robbery on a large scale, and prison-breaking—that's about the size of it, my dear."

"Will you take anything, Moley?" said Mrs. Gaffy.

"Thank *you*, mum!" said the detective.

"Step this way, then, and give it a name."

With that Mrs. Gaffy threw open the door of Gervase's chambers, and ushered Molewarp into them. She then proceeded to unlock the cupboard where the wine and spirits were kept, with a key from a bunch, which, had he seen it, would have explained to Gervase the thorough knowledge his laundress seemed to possess of all his doings and all his property, in despite of locks and bolts.

Mr. Molewarp declared in favour of whisky ; Mrs. Gaffy invited herself to a little gin ; and the two sat down, and sipped their glasses in comfort.

"Tell us all about it, Moley," said the laundress.

Molewarp was not prone to confide much in women, but Mrs. Gaffy having, in a way, belonged to the force, and been brought up to believe in the maxim that "one has nothing to do but give an answer to a question put to one, and that anything one says will be taken down and may be used against one," the detective felt he might relate his story to her with safety, more especially as the whisky was excellent, and her praise not to be despised, as coming from the widow of an active and intelligent officer. So he told her what he told the ostler of the Ring of Bells—about Griffin and the thousand pounds.

"I lost him down in Beaveshire. The beggar must have got scent of my being

after him, and bolted. He ran to ground somewhere at Braxted, I fancy; but you see I knew he had got that money planted somewhere safely, and I knew that that somewhere would be in London; so I've come back to town, and have got other business in hand: only as a labour of love, I just keep my eyes and ears open, and when I hear of a Lewis, I just see if he's my chap."

"But mightn't he have changed his name?"

"'Tisn't very likely. He's got clothes and things belonging to a Charles Lewis—a valise with the name on it among other things—and it wouldn't do for him to try any other. A chap whose case isn't fishy will travel with luggage marked in another fellow's name, and never think of it; but a chap who is in trouble and in a fright will always avoid any risk of that kind."

"Dear, yes! La, there, how clever you are, Moley."

"Bless you, I've not been a detective these ten years for nothing. We must learn human nature, or we're no use at all. However, Lewis or no Lewis, I'll have the beggar sooner or later."

"He must be a sharp fellow, Moley, to give you the slip."

"Sharp? I believe you! Why he's as deep as the old 'un himself. Bless ye, you'd have sworn he was innocent, to hear him talk and see the faces he pulled. He act'ally thanked the judge, and wished the jury might never meet less justice than they'd give him. But he cheeked me—and I never forgive that, you know; it's lowering of you in the eyes of them under you. Oh, he's a plaguey smart fellow, but I rather think Jack Molewarp is quite as sharp as he is—quite as sharp as he is!"

"And you haven't found any trace of him since?"

"No, or I should have nailed him to a dead certainty, Mrs. Gaffy, mum."

"Charles Lewis—Charles Lewis! The name *do* seem very familiar," said Mrs. G., reflectively.

"You're sure 't isn't him upstairs?"

"Law, no! Mr. 'Enery Lewis 'as been in them chambers this four years, and only down for a week or so in the autumn shooting, and such, as likewise a trip to Hastings or Brighton. But it *do* seem familiar."

"Ah," said the detective, watching her mental efforts contemptuously.

"Law, what a fool I am!"—Molewarp gave an almost involuntary nod, but luckily the laundress did not notice it—"Of course, it's my lodger—a young man as goes to the Docks."

"Oh, my chap's a cut above that. He writes a good hand, and could get a place in an office at once."

"Ah, I don't know as mine can neither read or write, for I've never seen him do it; but he's a very decent young man as is

regular at his work, and has a good basket of tools."

"Not my man, my dear. I don't suppose he'd know how to handle such things—not even a centrebit or a jemmy"—here the detective laughed at his own humour—"for he's one of your genteel thieves. No violence with them, bless you—nothing more formidable than a steel pen or a duplicate key."

"Ah, shocking!" said Mrs. Gaffey, ignoring with the utmost coolness a whole bunch of suspicious keys in her own pocket; "won't you take just another?"

"No, thank you, my dear! I've got a little job down in Kent—common-place thing—hole in the shutter business; but it won't do not to have your head clear. I'm off. Goodbye. Halloo! there's a lot of letters," he exclaimed, as his observant eye caught sight of the letter-box in Gervase's oak, crammed with epistles. "This chap ain't in much busi-

ness, eh? or he couldn't let 'em lie like that."

"No, he's only a-studying, as told me I needn't forward as he'd be back shortly; and what the young lady 'll say as can't have had her letters answered, I don't know, for she've written twice, and the last with 'pressing,' wrote on the 'vellup.'"

"Well, you can't send 'em if you don't know where he is. Good-day."

"Good-day, Moley."

CHAPTER XIII.

CONCERNING A MORNING CALL, AND WHAT CAME
OF IT.

FROM the eventful evening when artful Mrs. Bellisham's cambric pocket-handkerchief had acted as a sort of flag of truce between them, Sir Charles Lewis and Mary and her mother met pretty often. Oh, deceitful white flag, sham emblem of peace, fluttering on that sea-shore, how sad that your real meaning was not seen ! You were twin-brother to those flags of truce which the slave-dealers display when they land near some African village to capture and carry off any negroes that may be weak enough to put their trust in it. You are nearly related to the green bough which the

crafty savages wave in token of goodwill to the exploring boat's crew, who place confidence in the signal and are knocked on the head and eaten in consequence. Mrs. Bellisham was a species of Brinvilliers, who would have rejoiced to carry, morally not actually, of course,

Pure death in an earring, a casket,
A signet, a fan-mount, a filigree basket.

She was perfectly delighted at the idea of strangling love with a cambric pocket-handkerchief—garrotting, as it were, the image of Gervase Lane in Mary's heart, and making away with it. At least she flattered herself she was doing so, for at first Mary showed an unaffected pleasure in Sir Charles's society.

He was a man of great refinement, gifted with a mind full of fine fancy and peculiarly vivid imagination. He possessed much that is required to make a poet; and what woman is able to resist the fascinations of a poet's language—even though the poet himself be

as unprepossessing in personal appearance as Lippus or Claudus ?

Mary had been accustomed to intellectual refinement in Gervase, and she appreciated Sir Charles's clever talk thoroughly ; and by clever talk I mean not the talk that displays its cleverness as if it were a set-piece of pyrotechny, but which conceals its cleverness so well, without losing its flavour, that one finds oneself unconsciously wondering what that pleasant flavour is, as one does over a masterpiece of French cookery. Poor Mrs. Bellisham did *not* appreciate Sir Charles's conversation. But she was much too clever to allow him to see it if she could help it ; though at times she smiled assent to a remark which she ought to have met with a sigh or a melancholy head-shake ; and at others dissented from propositions, with which—if she had understood them—she ought to have agreed. When Gervase had talked in the same strain, Mrs. Bellisham had scarcely cared to conceal her opinion that he was

talking unintelligible rubbish—but then Gervase was a poor man, with expectations only. Sir Charles, on the other hand, was wealthy, so he could not talk rubbish in Mrs. B.'s opinion. She was too wise to interfere with his privileges in any respect. He might have out-Colenso'd Colenso, out-Darwin'd Darwin, or given Mr. Bright the go-by in advanced Liberalism, and she would still have smiled sweetly. "The rich can do no wrong" was an article of faith with her, to which, in this instance, might have been added as a rider—"especially when they mean to marry one's daughter."

So Mrs. Bellisham shared in the evening promenades, and flapped her hands and said "how clever!" and "how beautiful!" whenever she thought these remarks would help on the conversation. But her thoughts were far—but not very far away. Not farther away, to be exact, than Sir Charles's villa, which she amused herself by re-arranging in her mind's eye, always reserving a

specially comfortable corner in that elegant mansion for "dear mamma."

Sir Charles took very little heed of the good lady. His whole attention centred in Mary.

He made love to her, in short.

Now there is making love, and making love. The ways of beleaguering a woman's heart are as various as the modes in which my Uncle Toby might have besieged Dendermonde, and it would need a treatise as long as that of Vauban on Fortification to enumerate them.

You may carry a heart by storm, of course. That is a comparatively easy task; but when it comes to a regular siege, the number of ways in which you may conduct it is infinite. You may starve out the garrison, or surround it with trenches, or overthrow it by mines, or capture it by stratagem, or scaling, or even treachery. Sir Charles's plan for conducting his campaign was a simple one—he intended to surprise the garrison.

I have not time to hunt through history for an example, but I have no doubt, such is the depravity of human nature, that some instance might be found of a crafty and grasping potentate, who casting an envious eye on some neighbouring city, gave out that he was about to review his forces and have a sham fight not far from its walls. Then when all the inhabitants were off their guard, and watching the manœuvres with admiring eyes—lo and behold! the order is “right-about face,” and before the poor townsfolk have time to think, the invader has marched into the market-place, and has run up his flag upon the citadel. It is more than possible that somebody may tell me that I ought to have this instance at my fingers’ ends, that it happened in the Netherlands or elsewhere Anno Domini something or other. When, however, I state that for three consecutive years I, as a boy, carried off the history prize in my class, I think it will be admitted that I had enough of

history at that time to last anybody a lifetime. This by the way!

Sir Charles's tactics were identical with those of my supposed potentate.

He had an ally who approved of his measures. When he and the Bellishams had been acquainted about a week, he happened on calling to find the mother alone.

"Good morning, Mrs. Bellisham," said Sir Charles, just a shade disappointed at Mary's absence. "I trust Miss Bellisham is not unwell?"

"It is very good of you, Sir Charles. Thank you, she is very well—in fact, she has gone out to perform a few trifling commissions for me. Poor child! she is, I am glad to say, improving—in fact, has improved very rapidly within the last week—since we have had the pleasure of knowing you."

This last sentence was said with an innocent air, as if it were only added to fix the date, and was by no means intended

to be alleged as a reason for the improvement.

Sir Charles was quick to avail himself of the opportunity. "I wish, madam, I could flatter myself that it was really in any way due to me,"—and he gave a little sigh.

"La, Sir Charles! how rude of me; but then I know you will excuse me. But, to be candid with you, I do actually believe that I must thank you for having a very decided share in dear Mary's recovery. And I am very grateful to you. Pray accept a fond mother's heartfelt thanks, Sir Charles;" and she directed at him a look of affectionate recognition—a sort of modification of the ogle wherewithal in years long gone by she had bored holes in the sensitive waistcoat, and still more sensitive bosom subjacent, of honest Captain Jack Bellisham. Woman is a mystery! As I reflect on that glance she gave Sir Charles, I am struck with a suspicion that she might have meditated on the possibility of making conquest of him her-

self, supposing, after all, he did not care for Mary. With such a scheming woman as Mrs. B., such an ingenious *arrière pensée* was not impossible. "Wasn't she too old for such nonsense?" you ask. Not at all; she still dressed her front—I beg pardon, her hair—after the fashion of the miniature I have mentioned before as hanging in the little drawing-room at St. Maud's Cray. Too old! Who is the wretch who says somewhere, "Women are seldom too old to love, and never too old to suppose themselves capable of inspiring that tender passion"? Mind you, my dear ladies, I don't believe a word the rude fellow says; but there is, after all, something in the old saying that there's no smoke without fire, and a Mrs. Bellisham here and there in the world lends countenance to his unmanly remarks.

Sir Charles was encouraged by Mrs. Bellisham's ogle, whatever it might have meant.

"Nothing, madam, could give me greater happiness than to believe that anything I

could say or do would contribute in any way to Miss Bellisham's a—happiness."

It wasn't elegant, that sentence, certainly. If Sir Charles had only contemplated its future appearance in print, I trust he would have avoided the repetition of the word "happiness." But, you see, he was thinking of other things, and so he talked naturally.

"Oh, Sir Charles!" said Mrs. B., not at all in deprecation of the inelegance of composition, but with a little flutter, to let him know she understood him, and wished him to go on.

"Yes, madam. You cannot, I am sure, have failed to observe the very deep impression which your daughter's beauty and goodness have made on me. I—in fact, not to disguise it any longer—I love her, madam."

"Oh, Sir Charles!" said Mrs. B. again, encouragingly.

"May I hope for your sanction, madam,

should I be sufficiently fortunate enough to engage Miss Bellisham's affections?"

"It's very foolish of me," said Mrs. Bellisham, looking as if she were blushing, and fluttering her pocket-handkerchief—"it's very foolish, but I must tell you! The truth is, Sir Charles, I have felt an instinctive interest in you from the first moment I met you. You have my sanction and my warmest wishes for the success of your suit."

"You are too good. Oh, Mrs. Bellisham, you have made me a happy man!"

"Stay a moment, Sir Charles. Now, don't look alarmed; I am not going to impose any awful conditions. All I wish to do is to give you a few hints which I trust may ensure the success of your suit. You must know, then, that Mary is a very strange girl on some points. She was entrapped into an engagement some years since by a penniless adventurer—an idle scapegrace of a barrister. She was but a girl, and for a time

was dazzled by his attentions. In spite of my opposition, which I loved her too dearly to push to an extreme, she was engaged to him. He has but a short time since broken the engagement off. Now, I feel sure that in time she will rejoice at this; I am sure she has long since ceased to care for him. But her pride is pained, and the wound is still sore; so we must proceed with caution. She has some absurd idea just for the present about considering the engagement still binding, and declares she can never love another—will never marry, and all that sort of girlish nonsense.

“Your presence, Sir Charles”—here she took his hand, and pressed it warmly—“has already done much to rouse her from this folly, and I feel sure she cannot be insensible to your kindness—nor can long be insensible to your affection.”

“Do you think so? Dare I hope so much? I could wait for years for such a hope as that.”

But Mrs. Bellisham did not intend that he should wait for years.

“There will be no necessity for that, I think, dear Sir Charles,” and she placed her hand softly on his arm. “Be guided by me, and I hope I may see you united to my darling Mary within a few months.”

And now was the time to do a little stroke of business on her own behalf. The pocket-handkerchief was called into play again, and with a sob or two she continued, “Ah, you little think how much I am giving you in giving you my daughter, Sir Charles. She has been all that a poor lone mother had to live for, and in parting with her I shall part with——” here a flood of tears choked the good lady’s utterance.

“But, my dear Mrs. Bellisham, I never for a moment meditated parting you from your daughter. I—of all people in the world—should know how much you must love such a treasure as she is. I hope you will always consider our home yours, my

dear Mrs. Bellisham, as I hope always to look upon you as my second mother."

"You are too good—too g-g-g-good!" sobbed Mrs. B.

And it was well she had her handkerchief to her face, for she could not, for the life of her, repress a smile of triumph and satisfaction. She was so delighted at the success of her manœuvre, that she even forgot to feel hurt at Sir Charles talking of her as his mother—a reflection on her age which, at other times, she would have resented in the interest of the miniature and the two large curls she wore—curls that you would never have dreamt of connecting in any way with the narrow strip of velvet (garnished with a tiny cameo brooch in the centre) which covered her forehead; although, really, that strip of velvet fastened—but what am I about? Reveal the secrets of a lady's toilet? Never! I would rather be torn in pieces by wild ladies'-maids, a thousand times!

When the first flush of triumph had passed

away, Mrs. Bellisham began to survey her position. Sir Charles was rhapsodising about Mary and the future, so there was nothing to disturb the current of her thoughts.

Before long a doubt suggested itself to her: "What did she know about Sir Charles? He might be only an impostor!" So she puzzled her brains to discover how she was to settle the doubt, and in a short time had devised a scheme.

"Sir Charles," said she, taking advantage of a brilliant flash of silence, during which Sir Charles was lost in meditation on his love, "I have been candid and frank with you, have I not?"

"You have been goodness itself!"

"Then you will forgive what I am about to say? It is something necessary, not on my own account, but for the satisfaction of others. When my poor dear husband died, he asked two old brothers-in-arms to watch over his wife and child. They had ever done

so—of course never interfering with my arrangements in any way. But on an occasion of this sort—so momentous a step in my child's life (and one of which I must, of course, at once inform them) they might—and indeed ought to take an interest of the gravest kind. They may wish to learn more—in fact—well, to be plain—to know who you are. *I*, my dear Sir Charles, know you, and repose the fullest confidence in you; but they may desire some other guarantee that their ward is not making an imprudent marriage.”

“My dear Mrs. Bellisham, I understand perfectly, and appreciate your delicate sense of duty.”

“You know the old gentlemen are so particular! Old soldiers are so often martinets and very dragons about discipline, as if we were all in the army!”

I must here beg of you to pay a passing tribute of admiration to Mrs. Bellisham's powers of invention. The two brother-

officers of the deceased "General" were pure fiction, and no more existed than "General" Jack Bellisham had ever existed. It was an unusual flight of imagination for so prosaic a person as Mrs. B.

Sir Charles did not in the least suspect her of creating the two old soldiers. "They are quite right," he said, "to be careful of Miss Bellisham's welfare, and I should be the last to complain of their caution. Of course they shall be satisfied. Shall I write to them?"

Mrs. Bellisham, as might be expected, objected to that. She said it would be acknowledging too decidedly that they had a voice in the matter. If Sir Charles would put her in possession of the facts, she could communicate them at the same time as the news of his proposal, "and, let me add—as I hope I may—acceptance!"

"I hope so indeed. Life would be without an object or a purpose without Miss Bellisham. Ah, madam, words are not to

be found that can tell you how ardently I love her ! ”

Mrs. Bellisham shook him warmly by the hand, but said nothing. She did not wish to interrupt the current of their last conversation.

After a moment's consideration, Sir Charles said, “I think, madam, I see a way in which we could simplify matters at once. I can refer you to my bankers—a very well-known and ancient firm—Winslow, Jones, and Company, who will, I can assure you, reply in such a way as to satisfy the trustees of Miss Bellisham, and you can forward the letter.”

Mrs. Bellisham knew enough of the world to know that Winslow, Jones, and Company's Bank was one of the longest established and soundest banks in all England—in those halcyon days the Limited Liability Act had not been thought of. Sir Bernard Winslow was in Parliament, and greatly respected there, looked up to by all Govern-

ments, though he declined to become a member of any—in spite of repeated solicitations. Mr. Jones was considered the highest financial authority in England; and the Company, it was whispered, consisted of one individual only—a nobleman, who was what is called “rolling in wealth.”

Mrs. Bellisham wrote to the firm, and in a short time received a reply from Mr. Jones. It was more than satisfactory. “Sir Charles had but recently come into possession of one of the finest properties in Wales. His family had banked with Winslow, Jones, and Company from time immemorial. Mr. Jones believed that the death of his father, of whom he was passionately fond, had caused Sir Charles to wish to leave home and its painful associations for several years; but he (Mr. Jones) hoped the alliance to which Mrs. Bellisham alluded would dissipate the gloom, and that he would, ere long, take back a bride to his ancestral estates.” The letter wound up with the businesslike com-



pliment that "the firm hoped shortly to have the honour of opening an account in the name of Lady Lewis."

This courtly epistle settled the matter; Mrs. Bellisham, to borrow a figure from the Ring, patted Sir Charles on the back, and told him to "go in and win."

CHAPTER XIV.

IN WHICH A LETTER IS DELAYED THROUGH NO
FAULT OF THE POST.

BY slow degrees and with infinite care, Sir Charles Lewis laboured to awaken an interest of a purely friendly nature in Mary's bosom. By no word—and, as far as possible, by no look—did he betray that the real interest he felt was love. I do not mean to say that if Mary had been on the alert, or if she had entertained any feeling, however slight, of dislike towards him, she would not have read in his looks what he carefully avoided putting in words. But she was not of a suspicious nature, and she rather liked Sir Charles. I have said hers was a nature that was made to cling to

others for support. It is a nature you or I may not admire or covet, but it is a nature that cannot be altered. You cannot make an oak out of a sweetpea, and a standard convolvulus is a thing which I imagine never entered the wildest dreams of a delirious gardener.

Mary could not help her nature. Deprived of the strength she had derived from her attachment to Gervase, she had striven to cling more closely to her mother, but there was a lack of sympathy with the very grief, to find comfort for which she cast herself on her mother's bosom. She felt as if all the world had turned against her, and so welcomed Sir Charles's considerate friendship with eagerness.

Poor girl! She needed some refuge from her own despairing fancies. The idea that Gervase had wearied of her, and had wished to terminate the engagement, had preyed upon her mind unceasingly. It was like that terrible sound one hears in sickness at

the dead of night—the little murmur that grows and swells with a constant and regular vibration, coming nearer, and growing louder, until it seems like the roar of the sea—until you scream in your weakness, as though the waves were about to overwhelm you, or as if you hoped your voice could break the spell of that mysterious sound. So the belief that Gervase had wished to discard her thrust itself constantly before her, and by its very persistence became so familiar that it seemed as if it must be true.

Her mother, who had not scrupled to enlist poor Gervase's honour and candour as advocates against himself, now twisted those very honourable admissions of his that she was justified in insisting on the breaking-off of the engagement, into proofs that he was not unwilling to surrender his claim.

But poor Mary felt no resentment against Gervase, even if at times she could not help thinking he had wearied of her, and cast her

aside. She loved his memory, and cherished the recollection of their past happiness. He was to her as a dear, dead friend. Now it so chanced that Sir Charles Lewis, endeavouring in the first place to win her pity, for the sake of that which is akin to it, told her the story of his own recent bereavement. Unconsciously, he thus established a strong source of sympathy between them. She could feel with him how bitter were the recollections of careless words and actions that are hallowed by the memory of a dear one dead. She could recall happy days whose remembrance was exquisitely painful—painful with the pleasure that wrings the heart, the ghost of pleasure that is no more. What a world it is—full of beauties and delights that may become agonies to us to-morrow—nay, of trivial things, a dried flower, an old letter, the touch of a hand—that shall be sacred relics hereafter—

Household names, that used to flutter
Through your laughter, unawares—

God's divine name you can utter
With less trembling in your prayers.

Ah, happy dead—and ah, poor we who live! I have a favourite poet that I have pored over, how often, with a friend—quoting aloud, each his pet passages as they caught the eye while we turned the leaves over. Since how short a time has that book gathered a holier interest! When shall I forget the sound of a familiar voice as it read—

“Never any more
While I live
Need I hope to see his face
As before!”

With a common reverence for such tender recollections as I have spoken of, it was only natural that Sir Charles and Mary should be drawn together more and more.

And at last the time came when Mary was to see—as if a sudden flash of lightning had revealed it—whither all this led.

The discovery came upon her most unex-

pectedly. She had been endeavouring to persuade Sir Charles to look more hopefully before him. They were wandering in a quiet little bay, far from all prying eyes, and mamma had purposely broken down with stones in her shoes, and was going to rest till they came back.

Sir Charles stopped suddenly, and looking at her earnestly, said, in a voice trembling with the effort to subdue emotion, "You tell me to look forward with hope. Give me reason to hope. Mary, I love you!"

With that he clasped her in his arms—almost fiercely, yet with such an odd mixture of respect, that she did not—could not feel really offended.

"Oh, dear, dear! oh, dear, dear!" she cried, pressing her hands to her forehead. "What does this mean? Oh, Sir Charles! I cannot——"

"Hush! For heaven's sake, do not drive me mad by uttering that word," he said, hoarsely, grasping her by the wrist with

such unconscious roughness as to make her wince. "I ask your pardon. I am almost beside myself. I love you, Mary, beyond everything in this world. I know all. I have heard all from your mother, who wishes my love to prosper. Dismiss all thoughts of one who was unworthy of you, or nothing on earth could have induced him to forego his claim to your hand. Oh, Mary Bellisham! do not say that I have had no reason to dream that you could love me."

Then it all dawned upon poor Mary—her doubts of Gervase, the unintentional encouragement she had given Sir Charles. She turned deadly pale and faint. She tottered to the cliff, and leaning against it, wept bitterly.

Sir Charles stood silent and miserable.

"I see how it is, Miss Bellisham," he said at last; "I have been too presumptuous. You will not be troubled by me again. Henceforth life has no charm, and the sooner I end it the better."

There was a threat in these words that terrified poor Mary.

"Oh, Sir Charles, my kind friend! Pity and spare me!"

"Have you no pity for *me*?"

"Oh, yes! the truest pity——"

"But no love!"

"You must not—must not ask me for that."

"Enough, Miss Bellisham. You have signed the death-warrant. Do not waste pity on the doomed."

"Oh, Sir Charles, be merciful!"

She turned round and took both his hands in hers, looking pleadingly in his face with her tear-brimmed eyes.

"Dear friend, this has taken me by surprise. You must ask me no more. When I am more collected you will hear what I have to urge, will you not? And do not think harshly of me. Indeed—indeed, I have not thought what I was doing. Your friendship was so very, very cheering, and I am so lonely!"

"I must of course submit to your terms, Miss Bellisham. I will wait until you please to give me your answer. But I ask you, as a mere act of mercy, to give it me soon. I have suffered tortures of late—do not prolong the doubt which causes them."

And in truth he did look ill, and had grown visibly paler and thinner, and more restless, since he first made their acquaintance; and Mary, looking at him, felt it was so now.

They returned slowly to the place where they had left Mrs. Bellisham. She eyed them both with a curious scrutiny, you may rely upon it, and did not seem much pleased at the result of it, for she snapped at Mary several times quietly on the road home, when Sir Charles was not observing.

When they reached the cottage, Mary shook hands with Sir Charles and went upstairs to her room. On seeing this, Mrs. Bellisham invited him in; and they had a long conference.

During that time poor Mary was going through her bitter struggle alone. Praying, weeping, pacing the room, flinging herself in paroxysms of sobbing on her little bed, she went through terrible sufferings—poor girl! Then growing calmer from mere exhaustion, she sank into a chair, and endeavoured to see her path amid the chaos which presented itself before her.

At length she resolved to write to Gervase.

It was a cruel task to write that letter, but she completed it at last, having poured out her innocent heart in it, and wetted it plenteously with her piteous tears. She besought him to tell her honestly if he loved her—told him of the way in which they had become acquainted with Sir Charles Lewis, and of his proposal and her mother's approval. She begged of him to tell her candidly if he no longer cared for her. If he still loved her, nothing on earth should induce her to become the wife of another. She would wait a whole lifetime for him, or share

his poverty with him at once, if he would only tell her he loved her. If he had ceased to care for her, life had nothing in store but misery, and she did not know what she should do—if she did not die. And again she begged him to answer her at once.

When this letter was sealed and despatched, Mary felt sufficiently strong to face the interview which she knew must follow with her mother.

She went down stairs, therefore, and found that Sir Charles had gone, and that Mrs. Bellisham, with a severe air, was evidently awaiting her.

The interview began with a forced calm. The mother told her child that Sir Charles had informed her of his offer and its rejection. She wished to know why Mary refused him.

Mary said that under all circumstances she could not accept him.

Her mother declared this explanation to be unsatisfactory. She feared her hesitation

was due to some lingering remains of her folly about "that Mr. Lane."

Mary would not attempt to deny it. She did not consider herself free. The engagement was, she felt, still morally binding, though formally at an end.

Her mother supposed she was indebted for that quibble to Mr. Lane's legal studies.

Mary said it was due to her own sense of honour.

Her mother suggested sense of fiddlestick.

This was the first shot, and the engagement at once opened.

Mary declined to discuss the question further.

Her mother called her a disobedient child; and after a reference to grey hairs (not very applicable to the two brown curls), and their being brought down in sorrow to the grave, said she should exert her authority as a parent, and insist on Mary's accepting Sir Charles as a suitor.

Mary said it was impossible. Obedient or

disobedient, she should say nothing further until she heard from Gervase.

Her mother asked, with astonishment, if she had had the immodesty to write to him?

Mary said she had had the honesty to do so, and she should wait his answer.

Thereupon Mrs. Bellisham lost all command over her temper, and rated her daughter soundly; for she at once gave the case up as lost. She had no doubt of Gervase's wish to marry Mary, and she felt that the discovery of Sir Charles Lewis's offer was just the thing to override all the hesitation which Gervase felt about making her his wife while he was comparatively poor. In spite of all his high principle and honour, she felt he would be justified in coming down at once, and insisting on Mary's becoming his wife, if she still wished it.

But, to Mrs. B.'s astonishment, Gervase did nothing of the sort. Nor did he write,

as Mrs. Bellisham assured herself by a careful scrutiny of the exterior of every letter that arrived.

His silence puzzled her. But if it puzzled her, it nearly broke poor Mary's heart.

All her doubts and fears came back with redoubled force, and you may be sure Mrs. Bellisham did not fail to make the most of the event. "She had always thought he had grown tired of her, and here was a clear proof of it. He saw a way out of the difficulty at last, and was not such a fool as to throw any obstacle in the way of his own liberation."

Mary, as a forlorn hope, attributed his silence to his high principle and delicate sense of honour; but her mother kindly pointed out that he would at least have answered her urgent appeal, as he could have done without diverging from his principle, or injuring his sense of honour.

In despair, the poor girl wrote one more brief epistle—a last melancholy appeal.

"You do not write to me! What *am* I to think? You have ceased to love me then. I have now nothing to live for; your silence condemns me to the sacrifice. I cannot disobey my mother's wishes, since you no longer oppose them. I can at least save another from suffering what I have suffered from unrequited love. When next you hear of me, it will be as the bride of another."

She posted this letter herself, writing "pressing—to be forwarded," on it, in case he should be out of town. Having thus, as she believed, ensured its reaching him, she waited in a very agony of patience for four days.

And when the evening of the fourth day came, she felt there was no further hope, and she sank on her knees, and prayed for strength to bear her through her trial.

* * * * *

One day, as Bartlett was going up Gervase's staircase, he saw his friend's oak was unsupported. He had heard from him once or



twice of late, and knew he was shortly intending to return.

"Hullo, the boy's back again then, by Jove!" said he to himself. So he opened the inner door, and walked in.

But the alarm was a false one. Gervase had not come back; but Mrs. Gaffy had "just given a look in," to dust the books, and see everything was right.

Now when Mrs. Gaffy looked in, she generally extended her inspection to the cupboard, whence we have seen her in a previous chapter produce the wherewithal to entertain Mr. Molewarp. It was a chilly spring morning; and she had, as gentlemen in the dock are accustomed to say, if we may believe reporters, "partaken rather freely," of cordial gin. The result was that she was talkative, and trapped Bartlett into a conversation before he knew where he was. She inquired where Mr. Lane was—when he had heard from him last—and how soon he might be expected back? "for there's a letter as is

‘immejut’ in the letter-box, and have been there this week or two.”

“The deuce it has ! Where is it ? ” said Bartlett.

“ Well, you see, sir, I couldn’t send it, not knowing his whereabouts,” explained Mrs. Gaffy, fishing the missive out of the letter-box.

Bartlett looked at it, and gave a whistle.

“ I’ll forward this at once, Mrs. Gaffy.”

“ Thank you, sir ; as I am sure it will be only kindness to him.”

“ I’m not so sure of that, Mrs. G. However, here goes. Good day.”

So Mary’s letter was sent off to Gervase at last, and caught him just on the point of starting for England.

CHAPTER XV.

A DEPRESSING WATERING-PLACE.

“FALSE!”

It was Gervase Lane who spoke. A crumpled letter lay beside his untasted breakfast, and there were marks on his face which showed the agony that crumpled bit of paper had caused him. The marks were not traces of tears, but the deep seams and furrows that wither into a man's face when he suffers acutely—when a moment's torture does the work of an age.

“False!—and who would have suspected it? Fickle!—Yes, like all women!”

And he paced the little, quiet breakfast-room with long strides.

“ Oh, Master Gervase, what is the matter ? ” asked the kindly Joanna, who had thoughtfully come up with a fresh egg. Gervase had received the letter as he was dressing, and had been so long in coming down to breakfast in consequence, that Joanna felt the first egg she had boiled was an indigestible bullet, and hastened to replace it as soon as she heard he was downstairs.

“ Oh, Master Gervase, what is the matter ? Do tell ! ”

Joanna of course connected his distress with her special antipathy to the Countess.

“ Has she behaved bad, sir ? I knew it ! ”

“ Yes ;—but oh !—what ?—who ? ” said Gervase, answering in the affirmative, instinctively, in pursuance of his own train of thought, but immediately perceiving that Joanna and he were not on the same line.

“ Who ! Why her—Countess Lane ! ”

Joanna, in common with all the rest of

the household—at all events the English portion of it—supposed that the Countess de Miancourt would become Countess Lane upon marrying Mark.

“The Countess! Oh, I know nothing about her. She’s probably no worse than the rest of her precious sex!”

And Gervase took more prodigious strides up and down the room. It is not a dignified form of anguish, but it is a sign of suffering. Women faint or go into hysterics, sink down—collapse—deliquesce under pressure of great grief. But men cannot. They fret—they fume—with a swelling heart and knitted brow they pace up and down as a lion paces his miserable den.

Joanna saw that Gervase’s grief was personal, and she also guessed it was inflicted by a woman. And as she knew nothing of his private history, and knew her own sex pretty well, she judged it best not to make any attempt to offer consolation. She put down the egg, and retired with a conviction

that it, like its predecessor, was fated to chill into an indigestible bullet, but that it was no use to boil another.

“False, fickle!—My God, and I to think any woman *could* be true to a poor man—absent, too. Ah, well! Gervase, my boy, you have not deserved it. And—and—oh, how I love her still!”

He buried his face in his hands. When he looked up again it was whiter—more deeply furrowed. There are seasons when a man ages by minutes as if by years.

It was lucky he had written to tell his uncle he must leave for London; for the longing to arise and go—anywhere!—was strong within him.

The next night he had taken ship and was battling the angry waves of the Channel on his homeward course. It was a rough passage. The white spray dashed up under the bows as the heavy packet-boat plunged into the hollow of the sea. A drenching mist kept driving across the deck—a salt,

bitter mist, that dried on cheek and brow with a tingling crystallisation. The wind howled in the taut cordage, sweeping it at times like the strings of a giant harp, with a "thrum!" that made the boat quiver from stem to stem. The broad-mouthed funnel belched out a wavering cloud of lurid smoke, the red light of which was the only brightness to be seen aloft, for the stars and the moon were behind a great rushing current of cloud, inky black and seemingly motionless, save where the glare caught the low hanging fringes. Of course two-thirds of the people on board were prostrate with sickness. Gervase escaped the infliction—perhaps, because a man who is sick at heart cannot be sick at stomach too. But the heave and plunge of the ship made him giddy and weary. He flung himself on a bench in the cabin, wrapt a railway rug about him, and tried to sleep.

And, at last, kind Nature, who is ever so much more careful of us than we are of our-

selves, came to his relief, and his weary eyes closed; and, in his dreams, the old days came back, and he and Mary were once more wandering by the sea, happy in the certainty of mutual affection—the certainty! Ah, it was only in a dream that he could have thought of any certainty in love now.

Still the old ship plunged and rolled, and slowly forged a-head. The seas broke over her at times; but the hatches and companion-way were covered down—not much, to the satisfaction of those below—and though slow, her engines were strong.

Towards morning the gale abated. The sea, with its wonderful rapidity of variation, was changed to a living aquamarine. Its surface was barely more than dimpled by dancing waves, and a thousand sea birds hovered above them. The sun rose, and every hollow and crest had its dash of gold—the mists fled, the old boat steadied down to her work, and the sea-sick of last night came on deck trying to look as if

they were hardened salts, with chronic sea-legs, and stomachs as impossible to upset as the suspended cabin table, or the swing lamp in the grand saloon.

As the day broke the white cliffs of England gleamed out of the mist, and anon the puffing, snorting boat sidled awkwardly up to a little pier, like an asthmatic widow coquetting with her future "second."

Then followed the usual hauling and shouting on the part of the sailors on board and the hands on the pier. Ropes were flung about and wound round posts with a bustle and "yehoing" quite unintelligible to the poor landsman, who crawled up from below, glad to have reached *terra firma*, but disgusted presently to find that *terra* was not *firma*—or at least did not appear to be so—so thoroughly had the sea got into his legs. Why sailors should always shout so over the handling of ropes is as unintelligible to the uninitiated as the cause which induces grooms to "hish" perpetually when

rubbing down a horse or cleaning a carriage.

At last the old boat was as fast-bound to the pier, as if she had been apprenticed to a smart lawyer who drew up the articles with his own hand. Thereupon succeeded the dismal procession of pallid passengers coming ashore. Limp and languid, white and woebegone, dirty and dishevelled, they tottered along the gangway very pictures of misery. And indeed it had been a bad passage, and the boat was a terrible old tub, so their illness was not to be wondered at.

Gervase Lane was not a bad sailor, and yet he was not a good one. On this occasion anxiety and worry had pre-disposed him unfavourably, and although he was not downright ill, he suffered considerably. He came ashore with nerves so completely unstrung that he felt it would be wise to rest for a day or so before proceeding to town. So he determined to put up at Seamount for a while.

Seamouth was a quaint old-fashioned port. It was a sort of provincial Brighton with a dash of a seaside Tunbridge Wells about it. Royalty had once taken up its abode there, which made it more drearily respectable than ever. There was a granite obelisk on the Parade, recording how His Gracious Majesty had once bestowed his glorious presence on happy Seamouth—all set forth in indifferent Latin. Not that the bad language mattered, for the inhabitants were as indifferent to the Latin as the Latin appeared to any one who was not a scholar. The Seamouth folks were not scholars, and rested satisfied with the knowledge that the granite post, which stuck up in lonely fashion on the esplanade—like the last tooth in an old harridan's head—was placed there in honour of royalty.

Respectability—and respectability of the most excruciating order—pervaded the whole place. There was no vulgar enjoyment such as you find at Margate—no

high-bred gaiety such as you meet with at Brighton. It was what our Transatlantic cousins would call "a one-horse" sort of watering-place. Its society seemed to be on half-pay. It was swarming with mouldy military and needy naval officers *en retraite*. Its leading magnates were old Indians who had come back without livers, but also without lacs. Its shops were funereal, its assembly rooms were depressing, its amusements solemn, not to say ponderous. In short, it was just the last place in the world where a man in Gervase's condition, mental and bodily, would have stopped to recruit, if he had known anything about it.

He had his luggage put upon a groaning fly that was driven by a gaunt man, who looked like a mute with a cold in his head playing at being a scarecrow. The horse was a sorry beast, that appeared mainly indebted to the shafts for its ability to stand instead of kneel. As Gervase got into the complaining vehicle, the wretched animal

gazed round at him with a resigned air of wonder, and then admonished by a resounding thump from the butt-end of the whip, staggered into a "shog-shog" sort of trot, which got over the ground not quite as fast as Gervase could have walked.

Gervase's destination was The Royal.

Of course, there was a Royal at Seamount! Even if a king had never visited it, there would have been. It was just the sort of watering place to have a Royal Hotel—as dismal as a Royal vault, and almost impossible for any ordinary mortal to repose in—a place of high prices and low diet, of superior gentility and inferior accommodation, of much pretence and little comfort.

The raw-boned steed, having at last accomplished its wild career, came to a stop outside The Royal. A porter, very weak at the knees, and white at the seams, shuffled out and took charge of the luggage. Gervase, not without difficulty, extricated himself

from the dilapidated fly, and having paid the two shillings demanded by the driver—adding a further sixpence on receiving a hint in a sepulchral tone about “not including the man”—entered the Royal. Two shillings, you will admit, was rather dear for such a drive, in such a vehicle, for the distance of a mile, or a little over. Nor was sixpence for the man a moderate sum; his clothes would scarcely have realised the sum; and you couldn’t have boiled him down for his fat and bones (or rather the latter, the former was lacking), because there’s a prejudice against that sort of thing in England.

Gervase entered the Royal, and was shown into the coffee-room. A threadbare carpet, rickety chairs, a sideboard like a mahogany hearse, and a spider-legged table that looked as if it didn’t get enough to eat, furnished—if I may use that term—the cheerful apartment. His Most Gracious Majesty smiled over the mantelpiece in a very brown and mildewed print; and there were one or two



other engravings, scarcely discernible for age and smoke, hanging on the walls—and not hanging straight, as a rule.

A very seedy and lugubrious waiter, with an eye fixed on vacancy, and a dirty napkin under an arm, presently made his appearance. He seemed to lack the energy to ask Gervase if he required anything. He merely fidgeted about the room, flicking imaginary dust off the table and the chairs. Beckoned to approach, he did so—rested one hand, knuckles down and thumb turned well forward, on the sideboard, and striking an angular position, waited to be questioned.

“What was there in the house, sir? Anything, sir. No,—no beef. Mutton all gone. Fowls? No,—no fowls. A ham? Yes, a ham; and”—after deliberation—“eggs. Or a chop. Nice chop. No; fish wasn’t to be had. Chop? Yes, sir.”

A chop; a bit of apple-tart, with a pale heavy crust; a bit of rank cheese; some beer, that was a little “off;” and some

THE LOST LINK.

a little "on"—or ought to
dige from the quantity of
consumed,—these formed
and he was not wildly
ch a meal. He thought a
h the table before the fire
own up, might relieve the
as closing in upon him. A

as to their shells and
heir interiors; half-a-dozen
gical apples; and a bunch
raisins, with a few bitter-
reposing on it, were offered
th a bottle of port, that
e or the "coal-black wine"
Cornwall speaks as King
cial tap.

astly banquet Gervase re-
snatched up his hat, and
e seashore. There he wan-
n, listening to the breaking
watching the ghostly ships
wilight. Then back to the

Royal, for a cigar and a glass of grog ; and, lastly, to bed, after a dreary, depressing day.

Gervase was weary, but not tired ; so he passed but a poor night, tossing and tumbling in the huge four-poster till the sky began to grow grey towards dawn, and then at last snatching a few hours of troubled and unrefreshing sleep.

Early in the morning he rose, and determined to walk down to the sea and have a bathe. It was coldish weather for the water, but he felt that he needed bracing. So he secured a couple of towels, and, ordering breakfast to be ready on his return, he set out for the beach ; reached it, selected a fitting spot, had a swim, and then dressed and walked homeward again.

As he strolled along, he noticed a couple of men on horseback galloping to and fro on the shore, and several figures moving along the water's edge, as if in search of something. Presently, one of the horsemen rode up to him.

THE LOST LINK.

ven't seen a dead body anywhere have you?" said he.

said Gervase, with a shudder.

ly a gent come to the Ship last
l no luggage; very odd in his
red a room; paid for it aforehand
and ain't been seen since."

makes you think——"

o' the coastguard saw him go
ier, muttering and swinging his
he didn't see him come back."

l been walking along slowly as
sed. At this moment something
at Gervase's eye—a dark heap,
am of white, lying among the
s. He raised his hand to point
t the same instant it had attracted
n of one of the searchers by the
e. The man gave a run—stopped
s hand, and shouted—a peculiar
g, wailing sound, that Gervase
l long after.

They all hurried to the spot; and there, sure enough, was a dead body, lying on its back, just as the retiring waves had cast it up. The body was at once recognised by one of the horsemen as that of the visitor to the Ship.

With a couple of oars, and some loose planks and ropes' ends, from a fishing-boat beached close by, they speedily constructed a rude litter, and bore the drowned man to Seamouth.

This was just about all that was needed to complete Gervase's disgust of Seamouth. It was the crowning horror—the final disagreeable in a long series.

He went straight to the Royal, packed up his things, and turned his back on Seamouth, with a vow nevermore to return to it.

The same evening he arrived in town, and was once more installed in his own chambers, to the satisfaction of Mrs. Gaffy, who had cleared out everything eatable and drinkable

that she could get at, and therefore had begun to wish him back again.

He found another letter from Mary in the letter-box. What a pang it gave him as he took it up and read the address in that well-known hand. "But it was all over now. Perhaps they were wedding-cards. Pshaw! What did it matter—he would not vex his heart with it." And, thus thinking, he strode to the fire, and flung it in. A little burst of flame, and the letter was in ashes—like his heart!

Bartlett and he were oftener together than ever now. Gervase was glad to pour out all his troubles to some one, and Bartlett was a capital listener.

"I see there is an inquest on your Seamouth friend here, Gervase," said Bartlett, looking up from the paper, a few mornings after his friend's return.

"Oh, is there anything known about him? Let us see."

"There you are—bottom of the third

column, last paragraph—‘Mysterious Suicide at Seamount.’ ”

Gervase read the brief account ; and then the scene all came back to him, and he gave a shudder.

“ Poor creature ! By Jove, how ill it made me ; I had never seen anything like it before. Thank heaven, I’m not a surgeon ; I couldn’t stand the dead bodies.”

CHAPTER XVI.

A DESPERATE ENGAGEMENT.

AND what, in the meantime, of poor Mary Bellisham? What but misery and tears—a lacerated heart, and a soul crushed down under its disappointment and despair!

Mrs. Bellisham was not long in discovering that chance had interfered in some extraordinary way in her favour. She saw that Gervase's silence convinced Mary that her former lover had discarded her.

Mrs. Bellisham was triumphant, and she was not the woman to use her triumph discreetly or mercifully. She trampled on her daughter's heart every day with as much regularity as if it had been recommended

by the faculty as an exercise for her health.

She was not cruel by nature, and she loved her daughter better than anything or any one in the world—except herself and her own comfort. But in this instance she was impressed with the idea that the severe course she took was meant for Mary's benefit eventually. She cauterised the wound to hasten its healing.

Mary, however, did not see her mother's conduct in exactly the same light. Obedient though she was, and devotedly attached to her mother, she felt that she was being harshly treated, and home began to be a place of terror to her. And the result of this was a paradox.

Man is a strange creature—especially woman! Mary was so hunted and worried about marrying Sir Charles by her mother, and so hated the idea, that she—did what? Why actually she turned to him as an escape from him, if you can understand me. She

was so tortured by being constantly preached to to marry a man she could not love, that she could have married him to escape the persecution of thinking herself married to him—which is a paradox.

I remember once seeing an ox that was being driven into a slaughter-house become suddenly furious when it approached the ominous door. It turned on the butchers and scattered them, hunting them into the stables and the house, and driving them up on the walls. It had the yard to itself, being only hooted at and pelted at from a distance, or poked with a long stick. And what was the end of this struggle? What do you suppose was the result of the persecution? Why, the poor beast, in sheer despair, rushed of its own accord, as it were, into the very slaughter-house, its efforts to avoid which had been the whole and sole cause of the disturbance! My ox must serve as a figure to explain my paradox. It may not be complimentary to compare Mary

to an over-driven beast, but I cannot see any other way half as lucid, of describing the position.

Sir Charles waited—I can't say patiently—but at all events in silence, until Mary should speak as she had promised. Mrs. Bellisham again and again urged his suit in his behalf, though without his sanction, for he was a man of honour, and was prepared to abide by Mary's conditions.

Still the answer was "No. She could not love him, and dared not marry him." Mrs. Bellisham dressed up the answer to the best of her ability to make it less unpalatable; but there was no concealing it, though she still persisted in telling him to hope and wait.

The anxiety was telling very evidently on his health. He was thin and wan, and his nerves were in such a state that a knock at the door, a sudden noise—anything almost—would make him start like a timid girl. He complained, too, of continual headaches. It

was plain that he was fretting himself into a fever.

That amiable creature, Miss Blink, had not been long in discovering that he was a suitor for Mary's hand; and when once Miss Blink knew it, all Southstone might have been said to know it, for her scandal spread like a fatal epidemic—it seemed to be carried by the air!

"Well, my dear Miss Bellisham, so we are to congratulate you. A really excellent match. So handsome!"

"Oh, Miss Blink, pray spare me——"

"Dear, dear, how sensitive some people are. He *is* very handsome, you know, and one has a right to say so. And so rich!"

"But, Miss Blink, indeed—indeed, I am not engaged—not engaged to Sir Charles Lewis."

"Pooh, pooh, child! You may of course try to keep it a secret if you like; but you can't deceive me. No, no! You can't deceive me!"



"There is nothing to deceive you about. It is not true!"

"Then it ought to be, my dear. When two young people are so much about together, and when a gentleman who has avoided everybody else selects a single lady and lavishes attention on her, all I can say is, if they are not engaged they ought to be!"

"Really, Miss Blink——"

"Oh, yes, I know—mamma was with you; but of course that was necessary as a matter of form. Nobody supposes, charming as she is, that she is the attraction. Oh, no. You can't deceive me."

Mary was silent. She felt—as she had felt ever since she began to look at her position—that there was some ground for the report. She and Sir Charles had been very much together.

"But who has been saying all this, Miss Blink?"

"Who, my dear? Why everybody——"

everybody! It must be generally reported indeed, or it would never have come to my ears; for I'm no scandal-monger, as you know, dear, and should hear nothing of the tittle-tattle if it wasn't in everybody's mouth. But come, seriously, my love—has not Sir Charles popped the question?"

Mary could not trust herself to answer. She rose and hurried out of the room, bursting into tears, partly of anger and partly of distress.

"I thought as much," said Miss Blink to herself. "He has proposed and she has refused him, thinking he would try again; and he hasn't, and that's why she is so miserable. That's it, you may rely upon it."

And in another hour this explanation of the position of Mary and Sir Charles was town property.

Miss Blink was of so unamiable a character that I am not sure, supposing that she had known how materially she was aiding Mrs.



Bellisham to obtain her wishes, whether she would not have foregone her little bit of scandal in order to spite her. She little knew, however, that she was earning Mrs. Bellisham's warmest gratitude.

I have described Mary's yielding nature. She had only to be told she was to do a thing often enough, and by a sufficient number of people, and in the end, sooner or later, she would give in.

"My dear," said Mrs. Bellisham, "you are the talk of the town; and it is all your own fault."

"How so, mamma? Oh, don't say that!"

"How so? Why, you encourage Sir Charles in the most open way for weeks, and then all of a sudden you turn round and jilt him."

"Jilt, mamma! I am sure I availed myself of his friendship in the most innocent and harmless way, without an intention of encouraging any attentions. You ought

not to say I have jilted him—it is so un-womanly—I hate the word!”

“I can’t help what you hate, or don’t hate,” said the mother, snappishly. “You’ve done it, you can’t deny it.”

“You’ll break my heart, mamma, if you are so cruel. Do not be so harsh to me. You are the only friend I have in the wide world!”

“Then why don’t you take that friend’s advice?”

“I cannot—I cannot!”

“Cannot—fiddlestick!”

You see that implement flourished frequently in Mrs. B.’s conversation. It was her favourite way of crushing an opponent; and when that opponent was Mary, it was very effective.

Mrs. Bellisham was most anxious now to hasten on the match. She was grateful enough for the chance which kept Gervase out of the way, but she was not the woman to trust too much to it. She felt that at

any moment Gervase might make his appearance, explain his silence in half-a-dozen words, and then all her laboriously-arranged plans would be lost. With every day the danger of this increased, and therefore every day she became more and more importunate, until Mary was wearied to death of her mother's ceaseless talk about Sir Charles. Nor, I am bound to add, was Sir Charles much less tired of her, for, from condemning his silence, she had come to upbraiding him for it.

"But, my dear Sir Charles, the girl is a fool, and she never *will* make up her mind."

"I have promised to wait Miss Bellisham's pleasure."

"And her pleasure is to keep you silent for ever. Nonsense! I will not hear of such folly."

"I cannot depart from my promise, my dear Mrs. Bellisham."

"Promise, indeed! as if such a promise to a silly bit of a girl could be binding."

"I consider it so, at all events."

"Do you suppose that she expects you to keep it?"

"I do. At any rate, I should consider it a very bad way of beginning to secure your daughter's love, by sacrificing her respect."

"Sacrificing a fiddlestick!" exclaimed Mrs. Bellisham, carried beyond herself by indignation. "Sacrificing a fiddlestick!" she repeated.

How the rite was to be performed I know not. Perhaps Mrs. Bellisham would have enlightened her hearer on the point had not Mary just then made her appearance at the gate, having been "down town" to fetch some books from the library for her mamma.

"Now, Sir Charles," said Mrs. Bellisham, "wait here, and be silent, and we will see what can be done."

Presently Mary entered. She was not aware of Sir Charles's visit, and her surprise at seeing him threw her into some confusion. Ere she could recover her presence of mind,

her mother had risen, and placed herself at the door.

"Mary," she said, "you have behaved in a way that I consider downright disgraceful. When Sir Charles did you the honour to offer you his hand, you obtained from him a promise that he would give you time—that he would not refer to the subject again until you spoke of it. You have taken advantage of his kindness. From that day to this his honour has kept him silent, and you have not vouchsafed a word. I command you now, as your mother, to explain this to him. I shall leave you to do so."

With that she sailed out of the room. Poor Mary caught at the back of a chair, and seemed ready to sink to the ground.

Sir Charles placed her on the sofa gently, and then stood before her, hat in hand.

"Miss Bellisham, what your mother has said is quite without my sanction; I am still prepared to wait your time—that is, if I live so long. I shall, therefore, take my leave."

"Oh, I knew it must come! I knew it must come!" moaned Mary, rocking to and fro, with clasped hands.

"I wish you good day," said Sir Charles, moving to the door.

"Oh, no; don't go—please don't go. Sit down, and give me a few moments to collect my scattered senses."

He sat down. There was a silence for a minute or so, and then, in a low voice, Mary began to speak.

"I ask your pardon for having so long delayed the explanation——"

"Say not a word of that. Only say I may hope. Give me new life, Mary. This suspense has been killing me."

"You look frightfully ill. It—it is not on my account?"

"I would not exaggerate for worlds—but my illness is entirely caused by anxiety. Tell me I may hope for your affection, and you shall see how speedily I recover my health."

"It cannot be, Sir Charles. I cannot love you."

"Cannot!" he gasped.

"I have no heart to give. I cannot love."

"You love another——"

"No; that is dead and buried. All is past as far as that fatal, bitter time is concerned. But I can never love again."

"Time may do much. Promise to be my wife—promise only, and affection may grow up——"

"No—never! Yet I know what it is to suffer the anguish of unrequited love. I pity you with all my heart. I know what you have suffered."

"And you will not heal my wounds?"

"How can I heal them?"

"Be my wife!"

"Would you be content with a wife whose heart was not yours—who could but give you respect and esteem; who is dead to all love? Could you marry such a wife?"

"If that wife were you."

"Oh, spare me, spare me!" moaned Mary, burying her face in the cushions. She had entertained a last wild hope that when she told him that, he would no longer press his suit. But he prevailed, and she felt that her fate was sealed.

"Have pity upon me, Mary. Say you will be mine, and I will trust to the future. It will be happiness enough to be always near you; and I can live on the hope that time will soften your heart towards me. Speak, Mary."

"Oh, must I answer you?"

"If you would not kill me."

"I have warned you. I have told you all that you must hope. Nourish no vain imagination—if I become your wife, it will be but a hollow mockery of what that name implies. You will wed but a spectre—a ghost, incapable of love, heartless, dead. Do you still insist?"

"Be mine! For you I have suffered agony and torture unspeakable. Death and

madness have glared on me—their hot breath has scorched me, they were so near. To have you for my wife, even with the knowledge that you cannot love me, is Paradise—life—heaven! Be mine!”

“Then it must be. Take me—I am yours!”

With that she burst into an agony of tears, while he was almost beside himself for joy. It was a strange plighting.

And presently Mrs. Bellisham returns, and hearing of her daughter's consent becomes very gentle and tender to her, for her heart is full of triumph.

“She will be better presently,” she tells Sir Charles, as she leads her to her room. “Young hearts suffer strongly, but they heal quickly.” Mary groans, and shakes her head.

And Sir Charles goes homeward along the beach, and when he gets to a quiet place, out of sight, flings himself down on the sand, and shouts and laughs, as he rolls about like a man in a fit.

CHAPTER XVII.

AN EVENTFUL MARRIAGE.

IT is a difficult thing to kill Hope. It is as tenacious of life as those lower animals which walk about after their heads are cut off—as disinclined to die as a rich relation. There are some minute creatures which inhabit water, and which may be taken out and dried until they become apparently inanimate dust. But just let them come near a drop of moisture, and they revive, after days and weeks of seeming death. Hope may, in like manner, be desiccated, and yet a word, a thought, may bring it to life again. Indeed, the very utterness of despair may kindle a new spark for Hope—a fact which

the ancients wisely noted in the maxim that so often proves true—"When things come to the worst they will mend."

When Mary had seemingly abandoned all hope, there yet lingered a scintilla of that sustaining fire in some out-of-the-way corner of her heart. Like the Rosierucian lamp it glimmered faintly but deathlessly in the gloom. She had consented to marry Sir Charles—but in the very moment of doing so, she could not repress a thought that by the mere desperation of the act she might in some mysterious way be bringing about her release. She had a vague fancy that such a step must in some secret manner become known to Gervase, and that he would yet repent the misery to which he was consigning her.

So, although Mary had promised to become his, Sir Charles found himself apparently as far off marriage as ever. She invented excuse after excuse for delay, until it almost drove him frantic.

He had suffered enough when he was seeking her consent; now when she promised to be his wife, and yet refused to fix a day for the wedding, the torment was more than he could bear. He loved her with a frenzied passion, and feared least some other should rob him of his inestimable treasure.

Mrs. Bellisham saw this, and as she, too, dreaded lest Gervase should unexpectedly return and overthrow all her schemes, she did not scruple to encourage Sir Charles's unsettled frame of mind. Between the cold treatment of the daughter, and the incessant worrying of the mother the poor fellow was almost beside himself.

His servants had a pleasant time of it at the villa. He was so terribly irritable that they all moved about the house like mice. Not a door slammed, not a dish or cup rattled.

I verily believe if they had known the cause of his fretfulness they would have gone in a body as a deputation to request

Miss Bellisham to name the day and put them all out of their misery.

He spent much time at home now. Shut up in his own study, he strode up and down day and night, without taking rest or sleep. At times he would fling himself, in a fit of ungovernable fury on the sofa, and seize the cushions in his teeth as if to prevent himself from shouting aloud in his rage. At others he would fling himself full-length on the floor and moan piteously.

And in truth he suffered acutely. He complained to Mrs. Bellisham that his head felt as if it were bound round by an iron band, and he looked about as ill as a man could look to be alive.

At length Mary, as much out of mere pity as because her mother was perpetually teasing her on the subject, consented to name the wedding-day. This seemed to calm the poor fellow, but he still continued to fret, and was as pale and restless as a ghost.

A more miserable couple you could hardly wish to see than he and Mary looked.

Mrs. Bellisham, however, was radiant. She could hardly have been more gushing if she had been about to be married again herself. She plunged into the preparations with the greatest spirit. She chose the dresses, and very gorgeous they were, for Sir Charles had insisted on her allowing him to place a very handsome sum of money at her disposal in the Southstone Bank, and she determined to do things in style.

Miss Blink was to be bridesmaid, for several reasons. First of all she was almost the only person they knew in Southstone, and Mary had no relations. Secondly, she was a confirmed gossip, and Mrs. Bellisham, though she did not know the Southstone folk, was not the less anxious to dazzle them. She would now become a resident, and she desired to let them see she was a person of consequence.

"You see, my dear," she said to Miss

Blink, as she showed her the expensive veil she had bought for the bride, "You see really I am not so very poor—but I was anxious that my darling Mary should not fall a prey to fortune-hunters"—here she gave a sigh as if to imply that she, Mrs. Bellisham, had fallen a prey to fortune-hunters—"so we have lived as unostentatiously as possible. But I *can* afford to dress my child as becomes her birth when I know she is about to marry one who is in every respect worthy of her."

"Quite so, my love!" said Miss Blink.

Unfortunately, however, Miss Blink was intimately acquainted with the family of the head of the Southstone Bank. Accordingly as soon as a certain sum of money was transferred from the credit of Sir Charles Lewis to that of Mrs. Bellisham, Miss Blink was made acquainted with the fact. So Miss Blink quietly accepted Mrs. Bellisham's version, with the mental reservation of an internal chuckle.

Mrs. Bellisham of course went to the vicar to talk over the marriage. She had begged Sir Charles to allow her to do this, and he had very readily consented. What she wanted was to have a few clergymen to "assist" the vicar;—not because she conceived him too feeble to perform the service, but because a multiplicity of parson power seemed to be fashionable.

The vicar was a tall, powerfully built man, with an agricultural turn of mind. His hands were sunburnt and rough with work, for he laboured in his parish—though rather after the manner of a field-hand than that of a priest. He grew all his own vegetables—except his sermons. Those he bought—though sparingly; for he had a large stock in hand, and he worked them, as he did his land, by rotation of crops. He knew more about agricultural chemistry, I fear, than about controversial theology, but he made a very capital parish priest all the same, and was beloved by his flock, and, what is more,

looked up to by them. For they felt he was so sound as a practical farmer that he must also be sound as a teacher of religion. It is not logic, but it's human nature, that. Had he been deep in ecclesiastical lore, and a divine of the widest Biblical knowledge and scholarship, and yet unable to distinguish between a swede and a mangold wurtzel, I think it probable his parish would have despised him.

He was an exceedingly plain, straightforward man, and he did not see the slightest necessity for a number of "assistants." As he put it to Mrs. Bellisham, "Where was the use of putting a whole team in a plough when one horse could do the work easily?" He justly remarked, besides, that it was not as if she had any clerical friends who wished to officiate at her daughter's wedding. He could have had no objection to that, but he could not approve of her whipping-up the curates of two or three neighbouring parishes for mere show—especially when

there was so much for them to do just now.

Mrs. Bellisham was, therefore, compelled to give up her dream of a grand wedding; but she made arrangements for bell-ringing and flower-strewing on a large scale, and flung herself with more fervour than ever into the preparation of the wedding breakfast.

It is not my province to describe the breakfast or the toilettes, fortunately. I should break down in the most remarkable manner if I attempted it, for I never could be brought to perceive the refined differences between tulle and tarlatane, muslin and cambric; or to distinguish the endless varieties of silk. Nor can I connect the idea of a dish with its name:—*Cotelette à la Soubise* may mean sweet sauce, or *poulet à la Marengo* cold fowl with tomatos, for all my memory can tell me to the contrary.

But I can assure my readers that the breakfast was a princely one, and that as for

the toilettes, they were all lovely, only perhaps the bride's mother was dressed just a shade or so more magnificently than the bride. But, of course, under the circumstances, a mother's feelings needed sustaining.

Yes! at length the long-awaited-for day arrived—a dull, desponding day, with a sea fog that only disappeared to give place to a driving sleety rain that beat in from the sea, the sky looking leaden and dark to windward, as if it would never be clear again for weeks. There had been a very tornado of wind raging all night, howling among the housetops of Southstone like a discontented Banshee, and beating wildly at the shutters—a wind that made the little cottage rock like a ship in a storm—and many ships there were in the storm caught on this dangerous lee shore. There were minute guns booming sullenly away to westward where some unfortunate vessel had gone ashore.

Towards morning the wind fell and the

silence of the sea fog crept over the place,— a damp fog that bathed everything with a clammy moisture so thoroughly, that the change to a steadily drizzling rain was scarcely perceptible.

Despite the gloom, Mrs. Bellisham was stirring early, getting everything in order. Poor Mary heard her moving about as she lay on her sleepless pillow, with the feeling of one who is sick to death—to whom every sound is agony—whose nerves jar at the brushing of a fly's wing.

For the last faint flicker of hope was fading in her heart now. She had still clung to the fond belief that Gervase would give some sign, until she was driven to see that he had abandoned her.

“Gervase—I love you! Come to me—save me!” she moaned; faintly in voice, but strongly in spirit, calling to him for aid. So intense was the volition, that I wonder Gervase, as he sat on the deck of the tossing, unwieldy packet-boat, did not feel its influ-

ence—did not know, in his inner consciousness, that the woman he loved was calling him to her side.

Time sped along, and by-and-by the mother came to dress the bride. It was like attiring a victim for sacrifice, so pale and listless was poor Mary. She clung to her mother, and besought her piteously to spare her—to send and tell Sir Charles she *could* not be his wife. For now, at the last moment, she shrank aghast from the mockery of this marriage without love.

But Mrs. Bellisham could be stern when she chose, and she chose now, with a vengeance. She upbraided her daughter bitterly, until the poor creature was goaded into a despair that seemed like calm. Presently, when she was dressed, and had got downstairs, Sir Charles stole in quietly. It was contrary to the etiquette of the wedding-day, as laid down by Mrs. Bellisham; but there was great excuse for him. He knew that Mary still shuddered at the idea of the

marriage, and he feared that, even at the last moment, her courage might fail her.

It was a terrible interview he had with her—a terrible meeting to take place between a man and woman about to swear, at God's altar, to love and cherish one another until death should part them. In vain did Mary plead for pity—for respite. He was as sternly determined as if he had been an executioner, instead of a bridegroom. She had promised now, and he claimed the fulfilment of her promise. She shrank from him in terror—her heart smitten with a new fear, so altered was he in his demeanour. She cowered before him, and became silent.

Then his manner changed, and he became strangely triumphant. He bustled about the place with a nervous restlessness, inspecting Mrs. Bellisham's arrangements, laughing noisily, and clapping his hands in approval, until that worthy lady became so scandalized that she ordered him off the premises. Then he suffered from the reaction, and hung

moodily about the church in a very agony of doubt and fear lest Mary should refuse at the end, after all.

But at last the hour came, and the bride arrived, looking whiter than her veil. The ceremony was gone through, amid the wailing of the wind and the endless patter of the rain. Poor Mary's pale lips moved, but her voice did not repeat the solemn vows of the beautiful service.

And then the ring was placed on her finger, and she was his wife!

On their return to the cottage, Mrs. Bellisham was alarmed at Sir Charles's looks—and not too soon alarmed, for they had hardly been in the house five minutes before he sank into a dead faint, and on recovering fell into a fit of hysterical weeping and laughter that terrified them.

They left him to himself in the little drawing-room for a while to recover, and while Mary crept away to cry in a secluded corner, Mrs. Bellisham and Miss Blink—who

was almost beside herself to think what an odd scene she should have to describe to Southstone generally—went upstairs to pack the bride's things for the honeymoon tour, which was to be through Devonshire and Cornwall. In truth, the box was already packed, but Mrs. Bellisham wished to let Miss Blink see the trousseau—to

Show her eyes and grieve her heart.

By-and-by they came down to the room where the breakfast was laid. A long delay ensued. And then a strange presentiment of evil fell upon them. Neither bride nor groom came. Hours passed on, and it was time the breakfast were over.

At last Mrs. Bellisham took heart of grace, and determined to go fetch the newly married couple. She found Mary, and brought her to her place at the table—but where was Sir Charles?

How odd! He must have forgotten something, for which he had returned home, per-

haps. He would be back presently. Or, was he worse; and had he gone to the doctor's?

They waited in anxious silence all the afternoon; then a messenger was sent to the villa. But he had not been there. Then they sent about the town to look for him. He was not to be found.

To be brief, Sir Charles had disappeared! It was most extraordinary—so said both Mrs. Bellisham and Miss Blink—but gone he was, and most unmistakably. I cannot describe to you the state of mind into which Mrs. Bellisham was thrown by this strange discovery.

All that day and the next they waited and wondered, expecting a letter. But no letter came—no explanation came—no sign of Sir Charles was discovered.

He never reappeared!

Miss Blink was in perfect bliss. She had never had such a theme for gossip. She talked of it till her tongue ached for very weariness. All Southstone rang with i'

Meantime Mrs. Bellisham and Mary kept within doors. Mary was ill, and Mrs. Bellisham dreaded to face the public gaze. She had snubbed Southstone, and she feared its retaliation.

In this way three days passed. At the end of that time a stranger visited the little watering place. After making a few inquiries at the hotel where he put up, he went and called on Mrs. Bellisham. At first she declined to see him, whereupon he wrote a little note, and was at once admitted.

The next day the cottage was closed and deserted.

Miss Blink was breathless with astonishment at the sudden and secret departure of her dear friend, Mrs. Bellisham, and invented a host of amiable reasons for it, any one of them enough to poison a reputation.

And so the curtain falls upon Southstone and the mysterious events which kept it alive with a nine days' wonder.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MR. MOLEWARP PUTS IN AN APPEARANCE.

ON condition that you won't tell Miss Blink anything about it, and that, supposing you visit Southstone-on-the-Sea, you will maintain a strictly honourable silence on the subject, I will tell you all about the interview between Mrs. Bellisham and the mysterious stranger.

The stranger is no stranger to us. He was a thick-built common-looking man, with a somewhat soldier-like appearance. His thick lips were compressed with the air of one who knows so much that he is obliged to be careful how he opens his lips, lest some important secret should escape them.



His eye was a keen one, and he used it as if he knew it was as sharp as a gimlet, and could bore a hole clean through you in a twinkling.

He was ushered into the little parlour, of which he took a complete inventory at a glance. He was trained to do this. He took mental photographs of any new faces or places he saw, by an instantaneous process.

But clever though he might be, the most careless observer must have detected that he was not a gentleman. He was so careful to put his hat under his chair before he sat down, and he placed himself with such precision on the extreme edge of the chair. He was also so shy of making a noise. He crept about on tiptoe to look at the pictures and little odds and ends, and he pried so unscrupulously into the letters, books, and papers that happened to be lying about. Besides, though he had a pocket-handkerchief—it was a large bird's-eye cotton, of a

brilliant red, with a yellow border—he displayed a decided preference for wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, which was red and coarse, though there were no evidences of a laborious occupation about it.

It was, I repeat, obvious that, however intelligent he might be, he was not highly bred or over-refined—clearly not a nobleman in disguise.

Mrs. Bellisham coming in presently gives him a distant bow, which he returns by a semi-military salute.

“At your service, mum! May I have the honour”—and he is strictly honest in giving ‘honour’ its full complement of ‘h,’ you must know—“may I have the honour of a few words with you?”

He is standing up by his chair, at “attention” in quite military style.

“Certainly, sir. Be seated.”

“Thank you, mum!”

“What is your business?”

“You’re a widow, I think, mum, asking

your pardon. No gentleman in the family, I believe?"

"None, Mr."—— Here Mrs. Bellisham hesitates, and tries to decipher the signature of the scrawl he had sent to her.

"Molewarp, mum, at your service—Molewarp of the London police, detective officer, mum."

Mrs. Bellisham starts.

"Oh, don't you be frightened, mum. You've no call to be alarmed. It's about this here 'Sir Charles Lewis,' as he calls himself, as I've come. Did you know much of him, may I ask?"

"Not very much—but—why,—in fact, he married my daughter the very day of his strange disappearance. But may I ask your reasons for inquiry?"

"Well, mum, I'm sorry to have to tell you, after what you say about his having married your daughter, that he's an escaped convict, mum!"

Mrs. Bellisham gave a scream.

"An escaped convict!"

"Yes, mum. Real Dartmoor, and no mistake, and his name's no more Lewis than it's Molewarp."

"Good heavens!" gasped Mrs. Bellisham, almost fainting. "What is to be done? Oh, my poor dear child! Good gracious, it will drive her mad."

"Well, mum, you break it gentle, and I dare say, by-and-by, I can point out to you how to set this matter of the marriage aside. You see"—but here the detective checked himself, meditated a few seconds, and then, changing his line, continued—"however, that's no odds at present. You'll of course wish this matter kept quite dark?—profound secret," he added, seeing Mrs. Bellisham didn't take the meaning of the slang.

"By all means!" she said, with emphasis.

"So do I—so that's all right on both sides. You see my reputation's at stake here. I nabbed him first of all—a slippery

customer, I do assure you, and as artful as old Nick himself. 'Twas no easy job to fix the robbery on him."

"Robbery!" moaned Mrs. Bellisham. The vulgarity of the crime shocked her. I fancy she had entertained some vague notion that he was a superior sort of criminal—a forger at worst; but a common thief was terrible.

"Yes, mum, robbery. Lawyer's clerk—confidential servant, and cash committed to his care—all that sort of thing. Oh, he was artful, he was! But he wasn't quite sharp enough to give Jack Molewarp the slip—not exactly—so he got his sentence, and was sent off to Dartmoor to work it out. But he was too smart for the warders, or he managed to square 'em—I don't know which; but at any rate he managed to make his escape a little while since, and we've never caught sight of him since."

"Can this be possible? But are you sure Sir Charles is"—

"*Sir* Charles! Oh, yes, a mighty fine Sir! Bless you, mum, I'm never mistaken in my man. He got hold of that name down hereabouts by a robbery, I think."

"But I heard from his bankers—a letter"——

"Oh, he could write a letter with any one!"

"But I wrote to them. How could he"——

"There, don't trouble yourself with a lot of questions. Time and words is precious, mum, in this world. You don't want to learn all the tricks of the trade; they wouldn't be no manner of use to you, so I needn't explain to you how he worked the oracle about his bankers and all that. Take Jack Molewarp's word for it, mum—he's the man!"

"I suppose you know best, sir."

"Werry right, mum! Well, now he's evidently got a pal, or some one in town who has had his eye on me, and let him

know when I moved this way, and off he goes ! ”

“ His disappearance was so extraordinary—so sudden—and at such a time.”

“ Well, you see, he couldn’t help it. When he heard I was on the move, it was notice to quit, and he *did* quit, and wery wise of him ! ”

“ He had been very odd of late—quite eccentric, in fact.”

“ So would you be, mum,—asking your pardon—if you expected at every turning to find Jack Molewarp and the darbies waiting for you ! ”

“ And have you any idea where he’s gone ? ”

“ Well, I have, mum ; but it ain’t worth much. My idea is ; he’s gone—away ! ” and the detective gave a quiet chuckle at his own humour.

“ But, to tell you the truth, mum, that was what I came to see you about. I thought it possible he might leave

some clue to his whereabouts. Eh, mum ? ”

“None whatever.”

“Ask your pardon ; but is your daughter well off ? ”

“She is not a beggar, sir ! ” said Mrs. B., flushing.

She was reminded of the account at the bank, transferred by Sir Charles : but she determined to be silent on that point.

“I mean, mum—to put it plain—was she rich enough to induce him to marry her for money ? ”

“Certainly not.”

“Then she is pretty ? ”

“She is considered so.”

“Then the blackguard’s actually in love with her pretty face. Now, look here, mum. When this has blowed over a bit, and he thinks I’m gone, he’ll come sneaking back, take my word for it ; and then I’ll have him. So, just you stop here and keep quiet, mum,

and I've no doubt he'll return to his wife afore long."

There is no necessity for me to report this conversation further. Molewarp explained his plan to Mrs. Bellisham, who agreed to aid him as far as lay in her power. In return, he promised not to press any further inquiries in Southstone, or to reveal that Sir Charles was anything but what he had appeared to be.

With this understanding they separated.

Mrs. Bellisham had a terrible task before her.

She had to reveal what she had heard to her daughter; and the difficulty was, unfortunately, greater, because she felt she had driven her to the fatal step, which was an irrevocable disgrace and misery. She would have not only to comfort her child in this additional grief, but she would have to humble herself before her and ask her forgiveness for the part she had unwittingly taken in bringing it upon her.

Over the agonies of that scene let us in mercy draw a veil.

Vulgar and coarse as he is, Molewarp will be better company for us than those two weeping women.

Molewarp returned to the inn completely satisfied with his morning's work. He called for a cigar and a glass of brandy and water, and determined to take his "infra dig.," as he called it. He meant his "otium cum dig.;" but as his knowledge of Latin was hardly to be called even a speaking acquaintance, this little slip is pardonable.

Refreshments at Southstone were much of the order of refreshments at railway stations—or rather what refreshments at railway stations were ere Spiers and Pond opened a crusade against stale buns, bean soup, and bad beer. The brandy which was brought to Mr. Molewarp was brown and treacley, and the cigar was black, soft, and damp. But he was not a *connoisseur*, and sipped the one and whiffed the other in happy uncon-



sciousness of their being anything but the very best.

“Moley, my boy, you’ve done a good stroke of work,” he soliloquised, “and you deserve a little quiet and recreation. I’ve got the beggar safe now. There’s a pretty woman in the case, and that’s enough to induce any chap to make a fool of himself. Precious good job I never married, or there’d have been a very capital officer lost to the force. Let’s see—he married her for her pretty face, so he’s safe to turn up, by-and-by, and I shall have him. There’ll be a fresh charge, too, this time, sir;—bigamy, eh? I thought it was as well not to let on about that to the old lady, for fear she should have got too disgusted to be of any use. She might have refused to stop and lay the trap for him—women are that unaccountable in their ways. I’ve never had any professional business in the female way, but I should think a she-scoundrel might puzzle even Jack Molewarp himself.”

And Mr. M. smiled a smile of great satisfaction.

"There's one thing I must do, though. I must set my mind to finding out who it is that watched me and gave him the office. There's something confounded wrong about that. I wonder who it is. He'd better not let me catch him, or by Jove he'd get it. Besides, I never mentioned it to a soul—except Mrs. Gaffy. Hang the women!—it can't have been her. However, I'll look into it, and clear it up. I wish there was a brother or a father with these Bellishams. I don't half feel safe in dealing with women."

And Molewarp had some ground for dissatisfaction, for Mrs. Bellisham broke her bond with him.

She found Mary, after the first distress of this new calamity, was anxious to get away from Southstone at once. So she agreed to quit the place, and indeed to leave England for a time. The day after the detective's

visit, therefore, she packed up, and left, the first thing in the morning.

You see the two parties to the bargain were not straightforward in their dealings from the first. Molewarp had said nothing of the bigamy, and Mrs. Bellisham had been silent about the banking account. Neither party was sincere; each was aiming at his or her own object; so the bargain was not likely to be kept strictly.

END OF VOLUME I.





